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# HELL'S BROTH MILITIA

By the same Author

THE LEGION OF MARCHING MADMEN

LOVERS IN THE DESERT

HELL RIDERS

*(Co-Author with Patrolman Craven)*

ZILLAH: CHILD OF THE DESERT

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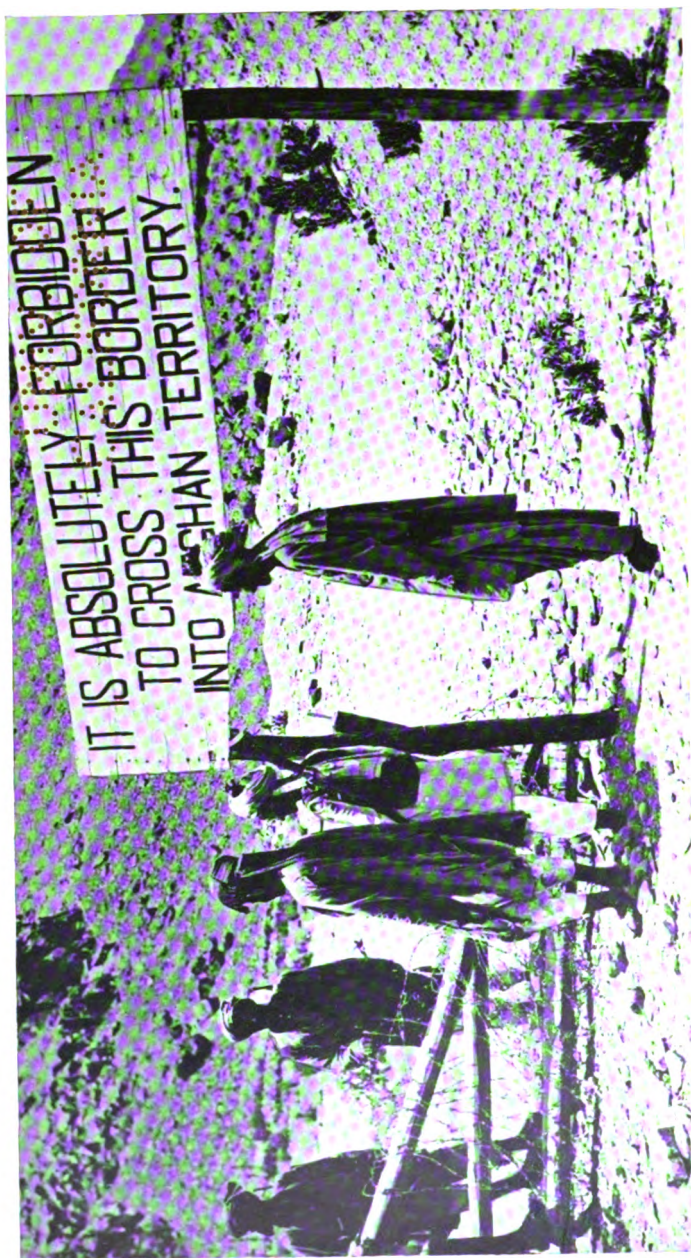
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AIRSHIPS IN PEACE AND WAR

*(In collaboration with Captain J. A. Sinclair)*

1875





[*Topical Press*

A GRIM WARNING ON THE NORTH-WEST FRONTIER OF INDIA

[*Frontispiece*

# HELL'S BROTH MILITIA

By  
W. J. BLACKLEDGE

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## FOREWORD

DIGGER CRAVEN, whose adventures with the Irak Desert Patrols appeared under the title of *Hell Riders*, here tells of exploits which befell him during a sojourn with an irregular force in the mysterious hill country that lies beyond the North-West Frontier Province of British India.

India has a population of more than 300 millions, and her people speak eighty different languages, the commonest being *Hindustani*. It is *Hindustani* which comes most readily to the tongue of the campaigner, and though *Pushtu* is largely the language of the Frontier, it is the soldier's *Hindustani* that is here used on occasions, not only for the sake of simplicity, but because it is more fitting to the tale.

In some instances the names of people and places have been changed, and certain episodes so presented as to make them difficult of identification.

W. J. B.



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# HELL'S BROTH MILITIA



# HELL'S BROTH MILITIA

## CHAPTER I

### ANTS

I START without preamble, with an episode that has burned itself into my memory, an incident that nothing but death can efface. I was sweating with fear. Since this is a confession of things experienced during twenty months with the famous Hell's Broth Militia, let me confide the state of my feelings during a typical experience by way of opening.

I did not find it easy to keep my nerve while tied to a stake, and that stake planted firmly on top of an ant hill, the great red ants swarming up my legs, crawling nearer to the more vulnerable parts of my person.

The yelling natives who danced around me were, of course, offering me the usual bogey-bogey stuff; and while their mad antics did not make a great impression upon me, they hardly helped towards steadiness of nerves. I knew my East. I had had experience enough to realise there was a way out of even this desperate plight. But all my reassuring thoughts could not stop the cold sweat pouring.

These insane devils were intent upon making me squirm. Tying a white man to a stake on an ant hill so that millions of red ants might get busy nipping the sense out of him—well, that was their queer idea of entertainment. Amusement seems to be largely a matter of geography. In the United States it is all-in wrestling, or some other fashion of the moment. In Europe the making or unmaking of war. In the less civilised parts of the East, slow torture.

I know of no kind so slow and terrifying as this. It is not new in the East. It is as old and cruel as the Himalayas. For the first hour or so I had been able to stand it with a fair show of nonchalance. There was a sickening irritation as the crawling things began to nip, a shivering and a flesh-creeping in spite of all one's efforts to remain stolid. The irritations increased slowly, insidiously. The crawling hordes were advancing. I found myself thrusting with the surface muscles, tightening and relaxing the flesh, as a horse will against the persistent flies. The muscular actions were involuntary. I could not stop them.

I had been stripped of all clothing. Wherever the myriads of red devils advanced, nipping, stinging, piercing, I shivered and shook in spite of myself. I stared straight ahead, not daring to look down upon limbs fast turning crimson as the massed army of ants surged upwards. Their progress was damnably slow. They would crowd an area of flesh. . . . Others climbed over them . . . inching their way upwards. I did not mind about my limbs so

much. They would heal. I was suddenly concerned about my face, and more especially about my sight. . . .

The more they advanced, the more the natives yelled and danced about me—women as well as men. It seemed that the whole of that tiny village hidden away in the mountains had assembled to watch the performance, to shriek with glee as the sahib was tortured until he cried out for mercy or went utterly berserk.

I had made up my mind about that. They would get no humiliating appeal out of me. The mental torture would not get control if I'd just keep my eyes staring straight ahead and my mind from dwelling on the possibilities of these millions of little butchers. Incredible the thousands of spots on one's person that can be pricked and bitten at one and the same time. Again and again I dragged my thoughts and my mind from these one hundred thousand irritations. Hands, arms, the surfaces long exposed to India's merciless sun, these were not so easily affected. But the soft and tender parts that had always had the protection of clothing. . . .

And all the while the men and women danced, shrieked with crazy laughter, tried to attract my attention with actions and remarks so obscene that they cannot be repeated. Seated on a raised dais about fifty yards away was Be-akle Lenhai, the Mad Fakir, the demented devil responsible for my horrible predicament. He was rocking, hugging himself with mirth—if mirth there be in such a ferocious and

twisted mentality. He it was who had started all this trouble on the North-West Frontier of India.

He was well-named. Be-akle means witless. He was the maddest thing this side of Gehenna. He was waging a holy war. His native magic had brought the most fierce of the Mohammedans to his biddings. His avowed object was to raise by fire and sword the new Moslem Empire. He was no religious mendicant subsisting on alms. He took. Men gathered to his aid as he advanced across the mountainous No Man's Land that lies between Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier. He pronounced terrible curses on all who attempted to thwart him, his favourite being—"May you perish by fire!" He had advanced along a trail of burning villages, wrecking, plundering, violating.

He was the wild fanatic who was to descend from High Asia down upon the plains of India and sweep away the white infidels. Once across this No Man's Land and he would head a gigantic wave of turbulent tribes down through the thirty miles of rocky defile that is the Khyber Pass, and so on to India. If he were not checked. And checked he had been, on several occasions—driven back into his mountain fastnesses by the one force he dreaded: "Hell's Broth Militia."

I was the first of the leaders of this force to come into his hands. With such a man, such a situation, anything might ensue. I knew that when the little red devils had done their damndest, when I had reached the state of being unable to register anything

further for the amusement of Lenhai and his mob, he would start the fire at my ankles. "May you perish by fire!"

I stared at the ragged beard tinged with red henna. How appropriate, I thought. Red ants! Fire! I must keep a tight hold on myself. This would never do. But it was difficult. I should start to laugh and blubber if I let these gnawing itchings get the better of me. Be-akle's eyes were glistening. Sometimes there was a piercing intensity. Other times an obscure observation of the beyond. Or was it my mental state? I can vouch for the fellow's magnetism, at all events. Immense stature. The frame of an ox.

Mad he undoubtedly was. Otherwise he would have been dead long ago. The Moslems the world over, and more so in that wild region, respect the brother whose mind is deranged. To them such an affliction comes straight from the directing hand of Allah himself. Such a man will always command an audience. Such an one is capable of anything.

There was some method in his madness. It was the hot season of the year, the time of the year when fighting is the only industry in the wild regions beyond the Pass. Until the autumn came round there would be no further scratching at the soil by these warlike tribes. So the Mad Fakir, with the lust for blood gone to his head, was gathering an ever-increasing army of Waziris, Mahsuds, the Madda Khel, the Zadrians of Khost, and all the rest of the rag-tag and bob-tail of racial tribes.

And all that stood between him and the northern mouth of the Khyber Pass was Hell's Broth Militia.

■



True, he would meet the regular British Indian troops if he reached the Pass; but it was our job to prevent him and all his kind from trekking down to that gateway.

If only I could get one hand free! Just to scratch at these nipping devils! My eyes smarted with the irritations. Tears mingled with the sweat. I was not blubbering. It was as if some strong irritant had reached them so that the tear ducts burst. But damnably humiliating just the same.

And then, as I continued staring straight ahead, desperately trying to keep my mind off the gnawing red ants, a woman walked into my line of vision. She was different. She was without veil. These folk of the hills, it should be understood, are not Indians. Many of them, though sunburnt, are as fair-skinned as the people of the West. But this was no woman of the hills. Nor was she an Indian. What was she doing in this god-forsaken spot?

She had taken her stand by Lenhai's side, staring curiously at me as if I were some new anthropological body brought forth for her inspection. The thoroughbred woman of the hills has remarkable eyes—eyes of a sapphire blue that distinguish her from the pure Indian type. But the eyes of this woman were purple-black, her face a pale oval with darker shades about the eyes and the soft column of throat. Her *burka*, or cloak, had fallen back, revealing the black hair plastered down the sides of her small head Madonna fashion. For the rest, she was dressed like the hill women—a three-quarter length, tight-fitting jacket of green velvet, baggy trousers of

scarlet silk tight round the ankles,<sup>1</sup> and voluminous cloak.

By the side of the towering Lenhai, she looked slim, slight, small-boned—but there was the devil in her smouldering black eyes. She neither laughed nor yelled but stood at gaze, talking quietly to the Mad Fakir. She was so striking that for several minutes her presence forced itself through my absorption with the biting ants. But I soon realised it was no good looking to her for help. She may not have been one of these crazy hill people. She may not become excited at the spectacle of my ant-ridden body. Except for her eyes, she appeared utterly nonchalant.

Who was this mystery woman? Was she the power behind the throne of Lenhai?

Would it be of any use yelling to her? It was a forlorn hope. But my whole body was creeping and shaking by this time. I was ready to grasp at any frail straw. I guess I was in a pretty desperate state. And there'd be some distraction from my gnawing agony in bawling at this cold, indifferent creature with the smouldering eyes. I yelled at the top of my voice, shrieked so loudly that I was heard above the din and racket of the dancing hill folk. I shouted not in an appeal but in hot anger:

“You are no Moslem woman of the Hills! Does it please you to watch while I am humiliated, bitten alive!”

<sup>1</sup>These scarlet trousers are peculiar to the clanswomen of the hills, affording them protection whenever there is a tribal feud, for the hillmen do not make war on women—and they would scorn to don the feminine scarlet in order to escape the bullet!

I shouted in English. Most of the mob, who knew only their native *pushtu*, did not understand. At all events it had the effect of checking the wild orgy. They stopped and stared towards the woman whom I had addressed in the tongue of the *ferungi*—the language of the people beyond the Pass and over the seas.

As for the woman, she stared coldly, suggestion of a smile curving her thin lips. There was a weird silence for several seconds. The people continued to stare at her, expectantly. It was as if they looked to her for guidance. In that sudden cessation of noise the gnawing of the thousands of red ants was intensified a thousand and a thousand times. Involuntarily I squirmed. Sweat dropped from every pore even as the little red devils bit and bored. For now they had reached my neck and I was shaking my head to keep them down—so like an animal with the persistent flies!

My actions raised a laugh, a laugh that spread into an uproar. I suppose I did look funny, screamingly funny, jerking my head about like an infuriated horse!

They were at the corners of my mouth—where the saliva frothed. I, too, was biting. I was biting and spitting and making all manner of facial contortions to rid my face of the creeping insects. I knew that if they got to my eyes I should be reduced to gibbering terror. And that would be one real triumph for these guffawing swine.

But one thing I noticed through all this increasing agony and horror. The mystery woman was talking

earnestly to the Mad Fakir. Was she interceding on my behalf? I prayed as they talked. I prayed as I fought against the creeping red army that now threatened to choke me, blind me. They were filling my nostrils—no matter how hard I exhaled. A sickening terror engulfed me. I spewed violently. I should have gone right out then, I guess, had not someone come along with a heavy broom of twigs and started to sweep the filthy creatures from my body.

That broom was harsh and incredibly rough against my flesh, but it was a heaven-sent relief to me. It was jabbed ruthlessly about my head and neck and shoulders. It was swept over me from head to foot in no gentle manner. But it was effective. The relief, the reaction was so intense that I very nearly fainted.

Then the cords were cut and I was dragged clear of the ant hill. I began to put on my clothes. Armed Pathans stood by. The woman was watching from a few yards distant. Her face was expressionless—except for the smouldering eyes.

"I couldn't begin to express my thanks . . ."  
I began.

"Don't trouble," said she. "There may be worse to come."

As I was led away I wondered greatly just what she meant. She spoke in English with an accent that had nothing to do with the "Free Land of the Hills," nor with India beyond the Pass. That set me puzzling. Where had I heard that peculiar accent before? This was no native of the East. At all

events, she had power, the power to set me free from that disgustingly filthy torture. She had given me a breathing space.

The ants had left their mark—or marks. It was like a terrific intensification of prickly heat. I itched to claw at a hundred places at once. Nevertheless, I was suddenly filled with hope, optimistic enough to believe that I still had a chance, that I might even make a getaway!

Every village in the hill country is walled and fortified. There are incessant feuds among the clans which make such precautions necessary. At any rate, the feuds were constant until the Mad Fakir came along to unite the clans in holy war against the infidels. But the fortifications remained. One would need to be something of a magician to get clear of these walls, seven feet thick and which were patrolled night and day by hillmen armed to the teeth.

I lay in my stone cell and pondered these things. The walls of my prison were of solid stone, like most of the buildings in these villages—for the country was just one gigantic mass of rocks and stones. The only opening besides the door was a circular one high up in the wall. It did not look big enough for me to worm my way through. I am fairly heavily built and top all of five feet ten. The only piece of furniture in the room was a *charpoy*, a bed made of a wooden frame with cord laced across after the manner of a spring mattress. I up-ended this by the wall. It put me six feet up the wall, but even then I could only just get my head to the aperture.

The light was still good. I could see across the courtyard of this cluster of buildings. Beyond was the village proper. The natives were back at their daily tasks. A camel caravan had arrived and there was much bartering and trading in the bazaar. It all looked peaceful and happy enough. Veiled and heavily-cloaked women, with gaily-trousered legs, shuffled through the dust of the highways and byways. Stalwart and muscular Pathans, many of them over six feet tall, strode hither and yon. They went about their peaceful occupations heavily armed. It was a habit with the hillmen. They and their forbears had lived that way for centuries—always ready for the fighting feud.

I measured the loophole. It was just possible that I could squeeze through. There were armed men patrolling beneath. At sunset they would bow their heads to the dust in supplication to Allah, for the Moslem faith was very strong in these folk. I decided that when the hour of prayer came I should take a chance. I must not let this night go by without trying. God knows what was awaiting me on the morrow. I was not afraid of death. Indeed I preferred it to the frightful tortures that these fanatics of the hills could inflict.

With the setting of the sun, however, my chances of escape dwindled considerably. For the great door was suddenly thrust open and the strange woman who had been responsible for my release from the ant-hill entered. She locked the door behind her then sat down beside me on the *charpoy*. I was too taken aback to speak. We stared at each

other for several seconds. The creature's face was as expressionless as that of a Chinese. Only her eyes were alive.

"Digger Craven," she said, "you want to get back to your company of killers, don't you? Even now you are planning ways and means of escape?"

"Where did you get hold of my nickname?"

"Never mind that. Would you like to walk out of this village a free man?"

"That hardly needs answering. Who are you?"

"Mahrila is my name. That is all you may know. In exchange for a little information you will be escorted to within safe distance of your camp. Lenhai has promised that."

"What on earth is there that I can tell you?"

She very soon made herself clear. Apparently there was quite a lot I could tell—the strength of my company of irregulars, the numbers and dispositions of the garrisons along the Khyber Pass, the recent movements of troops on the Frontier, the strength and type of arms, the secret of the ammunition dumps, the strength of the new flying unit, and what exactly was this automatic gun that had recently appeared at the Frontier posts?

All of which was very interesting. Only a magician or the G.O.C. could answer such questions. And so I told her. She was convinced I was feigning ignorance of the military situation. Even if I could not supply all the information she sought—surely there was much that I knew? Just how much? Wasn't it worth imparting in exchange for my life?

Or did I prefer a slow, torturous death? I protested—and wondered where the devil I had heard that accent before. It wasn't French, nor German, nor Italian. . . .

"What are you doing in the Pathan country, Mahrila?"

"I belong to this country."

"That's just a cheap lie."

She shrugged, repeated her offer.

"You don't belong to this land. You are not a Moslem—or you would be at prayers now."

"What does it matter who I am? I'm offering you release in return for a little information. Are you going to prove yourself as big a fool as you looked on the ant-hill?"

I wriggled. A thousand sores were pricking.

"What do you suppose I got you out of that plight for? Merely because you are a white man? Tcha! I want these few facts. You can give them. Stop playing the fool. Lenhai has less patience than I."

"I am not a staff officer. I know nothing of these things."

I tried to be patient, but I could see she did not believe me.

"If you think I am being terribly heroic, you're all wrong. I tell you I don't know."

"But you are an officer of the Kurram Militia. You must know something of these things."

And so it went on, a battle of wits, for the better part of an hour. The wench had a bee in her bonnet and it was very nearly as big as the beetle in Be-akle



Lenhai's turban. I'd known that these folk of the hills were crazy about their religious ideals, but I had never realised just how crazy they could be until I fell into their hands.

"You came here secretly with your native servant. Why?"

"You know why," I snapped, scratching at the infuriating heat spots. "I came to find out just what Lenhai was doing with this clan. The fellow has become a dangerous menace, not merely to the Frontier, but to India as well. He has caused more murder and bloodshed and terror among the tribes——"

"You're just a spy!"

"Don't be theatrical. I mistook you for an intelligent woman. I am doing a job of work, as an officer. You know what the Kurram Militia is. We are policing these parts. Lenhai is wrecking the countryside. He's got to be stopped. Now be sensible and show me how I can get out of this fort."

"On condition that you give me what I ask for!"

"For heaven's sake, woman! I haven't any information to give. What are you doing in this galley? Don't you realise that if Lenhai is allowed to carry on he might well start an ugly war?"

"But of course. That is what he intends. And once his plans are complete, all the armies of the British on the Frontier will not stop him."

She did not, I thought, possess those eerie-looking orbs for nothing. Probably she was just as mentally deranged as the Mad Fakir himself. Certainly she looked capable of anything. But what possible interest

could she have in this Moslem's holy war? She was not of the Faith. Yet she was accepted by these people. Suddenly she swung round, stared hard with her smouldering eyes.

"If what you say is true, you are of no use to us. Why should I not kill you now?"

"What good would that do? And what d'you suppose I should be doing while you are using that knife of yours? That pretty neck shouldn't be difficult to twist. The advantage would be mine—since you are between me and the door."

"Maybe Lenhai will persuade you to talk to-morrow."

She jumped to her feet and went hurriedly out of the cell, crashing the door behind her. Apparently she had suddenly lost interest in me. Perhaps she had just realised her danger—alone in this cell with a desperate man, whose thousands of irritating sores made it extremely difficult for him to keep a level head. I have no doubt that my ferocious bites were responsible for much of my reckless behaviour from then on. I had missed the opportunity of making a getaway while the guards were at prayer.

And now darkness had descended, but the light from a torch in the courtyard illumined my prison sufficiently for me to set to work. Once more I up-ended the *charpoy* and climbed up to the opening in the wall. I made a cautious survey. There were two guards patrolling beneath, typical of their clan, muscular giants armed to the teeth. The situation looked perfectly hopeless. Maybe if it had not been for the ghastly sores gnawing at me from head to

foot I should not have made the attempt. But my condition was such that I would have welcomed death—rather than sit still in that stifling cell with nothing to do but dwell on a lacerated flesh and scratch. . . .

I moved round gingerly on my perilous perch. The drop would be about ten feet—a mere trifle. Out I went, feet first, lowering myself slowly. I hung by finger-tips for breathless seconds—then dropped. There I lay panting. It was a lovely get-away—so far! I'd hardly made a sound. A dozen yards away the two guards stood chatting. A murmur of sound came from beyond the courtyard wall. I sat crouched in the shadow of what had been my prison only a few moments ago and thought hard. If I could cross the yard and scale that wall, I'd have more than a sporting chance.

It could be done, providing I crept round the walls and kept out of the beam of light thrown by the torch. I began inching my way through the shadows. I was then as cunning as any hillman. It seemed that I crawled for hours, pausing frequently to make sure I was not discovered. Reaching an angle of the prison wall, I sat and rested for a while. I was then out of sight of the guards. They seemed to be satisfied to patrol within a few yards of the cell door.

I was appreciably nearer the outer wall of the fort, a matter of half-a-dozen yards. Child's play, thought I, and chuckled softly. Looking back on the affair, I now know that mentally I was more than a trifle sub-normal, otherwise I could not have made the grade.

Clearing the intervening space, I crouched under the courtyard wall. It was all of ten feet high and spiked. Still the two guards patrolled up and down, blissfully ignorant of the fact that I was no longer in that cell. I slipped off my belt, threw it over a spike, began to haul myself up. A shot rang out. It whistled close to my ear, flattened itself against the wall. There was a yelling and scampering of feet. Hot lead spattered around me as I struggled to scale the wall, tearing my legs on the spikes. Something pierced my arm like a sizzling hot needle. Stopped one? But I was over and had tumbled to the ground in a heap before my shouting pursuers had reached the wall.

The shoulder burned and ached intolerably, adding to the general soreness and irritation of the ant bites. There was no time to heed such things. The bawling of angry and excited men was too close. The shadows of night, however, were all in my favour. The village, like all habitations of these mountain regions, had no street lighting. A few torches lit up the bazaar quarter. I gave it a wide berth. The tortuous alleys afforded plenty of cover. I slunk along the shadows of the mean little streets.

Soon the whole place was roused. Men and women were racing about in all directions. Their voices proclaimed the fact that the *ferungi* had escaped and was hiding somewhere in the village. I was in a spot. The village wall, seven or eight feet thick, would be crawling with snipers. No man went around these fortified habitations of the mountains unarmed, unless he were very old.

I flattened against the wall of a house as a great giant of a fellow came tearing round the corner. He pulled up sharply. I lifted my foot to his shin. We went down together. A decision of split seconds. I had to keep this hulking brute quiet. That was the essential thing. My elbow was under his chin. I worked like a madman, pounding a vulnerable spot. He beat the dust with his one free arm, tried to wrap his legs around me for the throw. But I had his gun and was using the butt to smash him into silence.

The next moment I felt myself lifted in the air. I came down with a crash, hitting my jaw against the butt of the gun, struggled clumsily for several minutes, trying to regain my breath. Like all hill-men, the fellow possessed amazing strength. He continued to throw me about, even though his face was a bleeding pulp and his jaw broken. I bent back one of his arms, further and further, heard the sickening crack.

Still we fought on, scrabbling and rolling in the dust. At all events, he had had no opportunity to shout and thus warn others of my presence. In those inflamed minutes I fought with death in mind, not knowing, not caring whether this were the end. My thumb broke on the leathery texture of his neck. I can see now the foaming mouth, the twisted jowl dripping blood, and the icy glare in his eyes. While I laboured and panted, the sweat poured, salting excruciatingly the ant-bitten sores. I was sick with the intolerable throbbing and gnawing of the bullet wound. But, somehow, I fought on, feeling that

only this brute and his incredible strength stood between me and freedom.

These men of the hills are totally different from the Indians, bigger even than the average Arabian. Rarely does one come upon a Pathan less than six feet in height. They are heavy and muscular, with an enormous spread of shoulders. And though they are like the rest of their Eastern brothers in that they know hardly anything about the use of fists, these hillmen are adept in a certain kind of native wrestling.

That I discovered to my cost when I fought with the hillman in the dimness of that grimy alley. Once his champing jaw closed over my jugular vein. But he could not grip. His jaw was broken. He gasped with the pain of the effort. I was sticky with blood—my adversary's as well as my own. We both became pretty well spent, pawing stupidly, clutching less and less firmly. I dared not leave him while he showed any fight at all. God! How beastly it all was! I trembled with rage because I had not the strength to lift the gun again and finish him. I lay on him, the dead weight of my body slumped over him in exhaustion. Just how long I remained there, why we were never discovered, I cannot say. I was dimly aware that the night was advancing, the cries of the searchers, the scurrying of feet, the hullabaloo of a maddened populace deprived of its prey—grew gradually fainter, died away.

And now I was in greater peril than ever. I realised the urgency of getting to my feet, getting on my way, before the dawn came up. But I could not rise. Hours passed while I lay crumpled over that stinking

carcase, precious hours; and I hadn't the wit to stagger to my feet. I could have cried with the bitter impotence of the situation. Must I give in, after all the effort I'd made? Again and again I tried, crawled a few inches, dragging along by the wall, slumping there to regain breath. The Pathan lay still. I stared at the figure. Dead? I never knew. Nor cared.

Up on my feet by the wall, panting like a wounded stone crusher. Mine a livery of ineptitude. Helpless. Hopeless. Then a staggering sort of run—only to pitch headlong into the dust. Whither? I had not the foggiest notion. Did not know whether my direction was towards the village wall. It was the craziest sort of jogtrot. Up and down, careering like one drugged with hashish, with one idea fixed firmly in my mind—keep moving, keep moving. Had I gone forth with all my faculties fully alive I should probably have stumbled into someone. I know that figures slunk past me as I lay in the dust. It seemed that fate was on my side in that last desperate effort.

Breath hiccupping in sobs. A deadening pain up the wounded arm to neck and shoulder. The incessant prickling of a thousand bites. A thumb missing—or was it just dead with numbness? Things to remember whenever the long, long hours of that ghastly night are recalled.

Other memories, seething and sullen yet vivid, of those darkened streets that wound endlessly, of sudden alarms as I snuggled into the dust, my nose within a few inches of passing feet, gaily slipped feet, familiar silk-trousered legs, heavy sandals of

stalwart men, giant Pathans and their women folk drifting back to well-guarded homes, scraps of conversation. . . . They seemed pretty certain I could not leave the village, that I'd never get beyond the fortified walls, even in the darkness.

Then silence. The village slept. With the strange quietude that precedes the dawn I was recovering sufficiently to gain some sense of direction. And now I had the gun and cartridge belts of that figure I had left slumped in the dirt. My one desire was to get beyond this village and down into the valley where I might find a cave. Then sleep. Heavens! How I longed for sleep!

The wall. Figures patrolling. It would be easy enough to reach the top, for there were jutting steps at intervals used by the guards. But how get by these armed patrols? There was one squatting on his haunches immediately above, his back towards me, staring out into the blackness. If I brained him with the gun, how long would it be before he was discovered and I followed? I was in no case to outdistance a fit man. To walk was painful enough.

I had the solution of that difficulty. He must not be discovered. I crept, taking the jutting stones slowly and painfully.

When one's life depends on every little move. . . . I reached the topmost step, my chin over the rim of the wall. On the right and left flanks dim figures moved restlessly, heard rather than seen. But the squatting figure little more than a yard away never moved. It was too much to hope that he would be asleep. I squatted too, resting for the effort,



reserving the remnants of energy left in my wearied muscles.

An unforgettable moment. I crept again, inching a way forward, snout of a gun grasped in my hand. The fellow turned a split second too late. The butt crashed. He gave a choking sort of grunt and crumpled up. A swift glance to right and left, then I was dragging him across the top of the wall—a matter of seven or eight feet and no light task, for he was a hefty wallah. I tumbled him over, heard the soft bump of his fall, and flopped over on top of him.

The drop took the breath out of me for a space. But soon I was up, scurrying off at a staggering run, heading blindly into the welcome darkness. Free? But was I? Dawn would soon be up now. There would come search parties, scouring the countryside. In this land of fantastic hills and black gulleys, however, there were thousands of crevices in which one might hide. Soon I would lie down and sleep in some hideout of the gulley. I had to keep on telling myself that. It needed superhuman effort to keep moving just then.

I was still stumbling over the stones when the dawn broke up the black dome of the heavens. The village was a mere smudge away up on the hillside. I knew this gulley. It was the one through which a treacherous native servant had led me. I passed the identical cave in which I had laid hidden while my "boy"—every Indian servant is a boy, no matter what his age—had gone off as a decoy to lead the Mad Fakir back to me. But the boy had turned

traitor. He not only brought Lenhai to my cave but a score of armed hillmen as well.

The plan was, of course, that the Mad Fakir should be induced to visit me alone, with the pretence that I had brought much valuable information about the sahibs of the Kurram Militia—otherwise “Hell’s Broth Militia,” as it was so aptly nicknamed. The scheme had flopped horribly. Hence my capture and subsequent torture.

No good dwelling on that now. Probably this cave was the last place they’d look in for me, since I had already been caught there; but I gave it a wide berth just the same. I plodded on, careering crazily along the broken bed of the gulley. Now the sun was splashing the heavens with colour. Back in that village the hue and cry would be on. My world of rocks was turning from black to grey. A raging thirst was added to my other aches and pains. There must be something pretty tough about the instinct of self-preservation—otherwise I should have dropped in my tracks long ago.

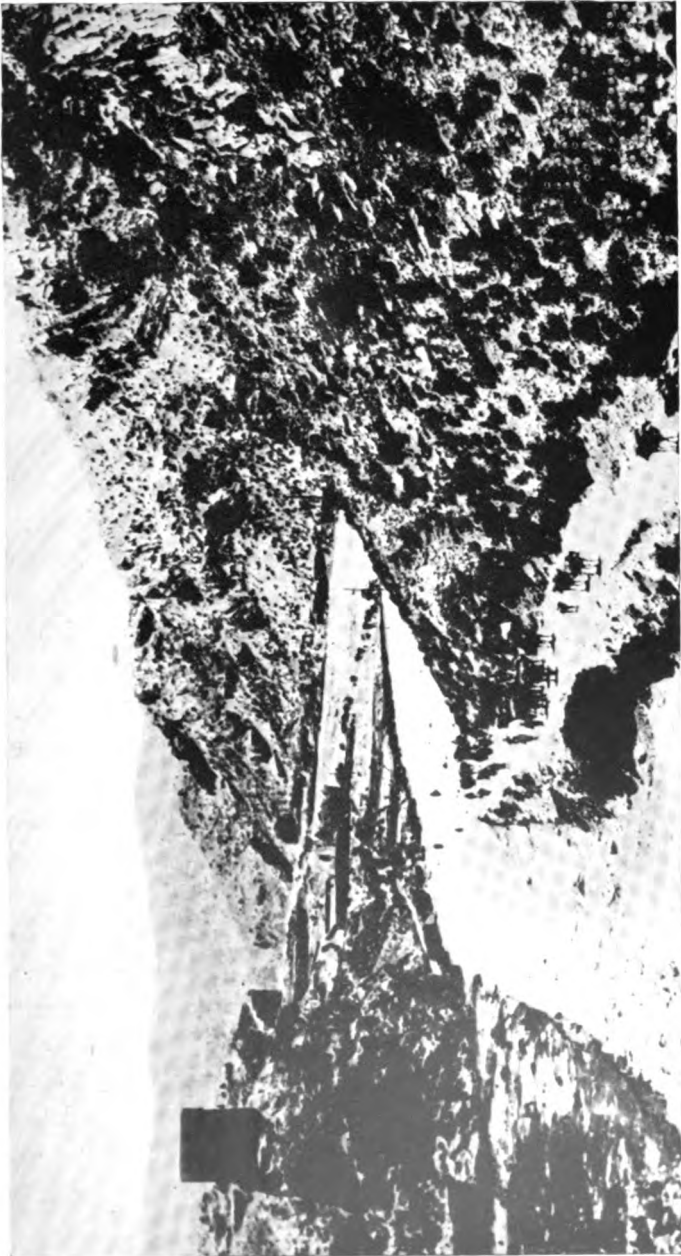
I kept on, lurching over the broken stones like a sleep-walker. I knew by the sun that my direction was right. There wasn’t a sound in that grim valley, except the stubbing of my clumsy feet against the flints. Then I pitched forward, lay still for a timeless period. Presently I began to crawl. I’d seen a ledge of rock that looked as if it contained water. Water! God in heaven! What thirst was this? It blistered my mouth. It threatened the breathing—as if one were about to choke.

But I made the ledge and I was right. I dragged

myself along and lay with my head in the dirty water. The relief was indescribable. I drew in copious draughts of the cooling liquid, splashed it about head and neck. It might have been reeking with germs—probably was—but it was heaven-sent nectar to me! I lay drinking and bathing while my spirits rose. I could go on again now. I went, treading a rugged path along the hillside with leaden feet. I refused to give in to the creeping sensation of numbness. Arms hung like dead weights so that I hardly knew they were there. Only my legs seemed to move. . . . lurching, stumbling, pitching. . . . Then the black-out. . . .

I was not conscious of anything for the remainder of that day. I know that I awoke on one occasion and the whole world was dark. Night again, I thought feebly, and wondered just where I had fallen. Maybe I was on some perilous perch of rock. It was impossible to see in that dense blackness. Maybe some little movement would pitch me over on to jagged crags. Anyway, I was too utterly weary to move. The cool stone against the heated lacerations was infinitely soothing. I curled up and went to sleep again.

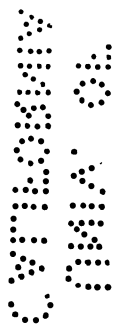
From then on—a fitful sleeping and dreams. Always when I awoke and opened my eyes the world was black, and for a space terror walked the brain. I fancied I must be blind. Why was it always dark? It was many hours before I realised that I must have crawled into the inner recess of a cave in the mountain-side. I had begun by groping my way around until I came to the shaft of light. Then I knew. Proceeding



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cautiously, I came to the mouth, and broad daylight. Whether I had been in that cleft one day or two I could not say. I was considerably refreshed. The flesh wound had crusted over. The broken thumb had swollen to the size of two. The ant-bites were not nearly so troublesome. I'd been a great deal nearer to death. As my brain grew clearer I saw that this was definitely a case for optimism.

I crawled out and gazed up and down the valley. It was a dead world. There was not a sign of life anywhere. So, I had escaped? How long would it take the company to locate me? They had not the remotest idea as to the direction the boy and I were to take. The whole thing was carried out with the utmost secrecy. It was only after much persuasion that the Colonel had permitted me to undertake the job at all. We had not reckoned on the treacherous native boy.

The rank and file of Hell's Broth Militia was composed entirely of natives, also the non-commissioned officers, with only half-a-dozen sahibs to control them. They were irregulars, many of whom claimed unbroken descent from the warriors who had fought the armies of Alexander the Great, others were just hard-bitten children of a mixed refugee parenthood of Afghans, Mongolians, Afridis, Pathan deserters and heaven knows what. The force was composed of the worst native elements—cattle thieves, outlaws, bandits, deserters from the clans and deserters from the Army proper—a strange brotherhood held together by a handful of officers, its chief industry guerilla fighting such as these

rascals' forbears had enjoyed for centuries. As ferocious and wild a mob as any border country could muster.

But it was rare that we found a traitor amongst them. The pay and rationing was better than they could get elsewhere, and more important still to natives of such calibre, there was always a scrap in the offing. Once they had adjusted themselves to our apology for discipline they were loyal almost to a man, despite their wildness. I could have staked my reputation on that native boy, for we had been on similar stunts before. Now I could only assume that he had turned traitor, since, having betrayed me to the Mad Fakir and his bodyguard, he had completely disappeared.

I thought hard of these things as I stared up and down that barren gully. How long since I left the camp? More than a week, I judged. Perhaps two. I was conscious of hunger and thirst and I guess I must have been in that cave two or three days, maybe more. The company might search for weeks in this Free Land of the Hills without ever coming upon me. There were thousands of crannies and clefts in these regions where a man could lose himself. I could hardly hope for help in that direction. There was nothing for it but to make my own way back. If I kept going in a southerly direction I was almost certain to hit a caravan road and maybe a friendly caravan loping towards Peshawar with merchandise from Kabul or Bokhara.

I started out once more, trudging mechanically with a wary eye on the sun. It seemed as if I had the

whole world to myself, and it appeared that way for hours. I struck a caravan trail at long last. It must then have been well past noon. I came upon a water-hole and sat down to refresh myself. I had no intention of falling asleep. But it is fatal for a weary man to sit drowsing in the sun.

I awoke with a jerk and leapt to my feet. Instinctively I struck out at the great hulking hillman who had awakened me. And then I had another guess coming. The fellow grabbed my arms, pinned them helplessly to my sides and held me thus. We stared at each other for long seconds. He looked a typical hillman—six feet of brawn and muscle, heavy, bearded jowl, damnably familiar in his turban, long tight-fitting coat, rough blouse, cummerbund and baggy breeches. And then the shock of my life, so to speak.

“Now . . . just where in hell did you spring from, buddy?”

This must be another delusion, I told myself. Here was a native of the mountains, every inch of him, clothes, stature, jowl, cartridge belts, guns, knives and all. And he was addressing me in English—English with American idioms and an Irish drawl! No. It couldn't be. Not in the middle of this country of black hills and grey stone. After all I'd gone through. . . . It was just my brain playing tricks on me. . . .

“Say that again,” I gasped.

He grinned, showing two rows of even white teeth, big teeth, big like himself, big like tombstones in the black scrub of beard. He repeated the words,



realising perhaps from my torn and ragged apology for a uniform that I'd been in some tough spot, repeated them slowly and carefully, his grey eyes twinkling.

"It's a long story. It cannot be told to any stranger who happens along. I'm trying to make my way back to the Kurram Militia cantonment. What excites me is just where *you* sprang from?"

"That's simple enough," the stranger laughed. "I'm trekking from Afghanistan to India. Been visiting Kabul. Which accounts for the native clobber I'm wearing. That's my caravan over there."

I swung round, stared hard. There, not fifty yards away, was a camel caravan replete with camel-teers, baggage, water skins and all the usual paraphernalia of this ancient type of transport. Funny. I'd been too sound asleep to hear it approach, and too startled and excited at the encounter with this mysterious Irish-American to notice it after I had been so rudely awakened. I started laughing like a hysterical schoolgirl. This was too much for my mental equilibrium!

## CHAPTER II

### MYSTERY OF A MISSING AIRMAN

THERE was time for much reflection during my stay in hospital at Peshawar. I lived over again the episode of my experience at the hands of Lenhai. Colonel Strong, the commander of our native levies, and a tough, mosquito-salted warrior with many years service in India, had been at my bedside himself, taking notes of every detail of that incident. He was anxious that I should get out of dock and lead him and the company to that fortified village of the hills. So was I.

But, once on the trek again, it was not so easy. Mine was a blind escape at dead of night. I could lead the company up to a certain gulley. Beyond that—direction was on the knees of the gods. I rode on the Colonel's right at the head of the column. On his left rode one Barney Binns—the Irish-American who had so startlingly come to my rescue on that memorable afternoon. He was with us in the guise of a correspondent, being the sort of fellow who could wangle his way into anything. He was, in fact, a world-wandering author of some distinction whose real name would be recognised wherever the English tongue is spoken. He was blood brother to the Irishman who said—"Is this a private fight, or

can anybody join in?" He had just visited the forbidden cities of Afghanistan—after many months of wangling, with a photographer friend. The camera man had elected to continue homewards with his spoil. Binns had turned back—with Hell's Broth Militia. It seemed he had some information, for he had learned much of Lenhai's source of supply of arms. Whatever it was, he had wangled again and was now one of us. These author-travellers have the audacity of Old Nick himself.

Binns, however, soon proved himself. We had been trekking for about four hours through the most desolate, rock-strewn countryside on earth. A thick haze lay around. The giant furnace of a pitiless sun beat down, wave upon wave. There was no shade from the raging heat in this valley. Suddenly a shot rang out, ranged over the column, echoing with that peculiar metallic sound typical of these stony gullies.

The Colonel yelled an order and the whole ragged column dived for cover behind boulders. Apparently Binns was not used to orders. He dismounted, threw his reins at me as I drew into a cleft, and away he scampered up the hillside towards the spot from which the sniper's bullet had been fired.

"Come back, you fool!" bawled Strong.

A hail of lead crackled through the heat haze. Binns ducked as swiftly, lay under a jagged crag, grinning. The cleanest shave I'd seen for some time. Just then he was not able either to come back or go forward. He lay still, half-way up the hill, while the bullets sang. The incident was not new.

Snipers are born every day in the Khyber country. We rarely moved without their company. They were the finest snipers in the world. Unless we routed them, they'd follow the column for days, potting at us from a thousand nooks and crannies and crevices of the granite hills. Sniping was, in fact, one of their major pastimes. It still is.

There, north-east of the Pass, lay the Mohmand, a vast unadministrative area of wild mountains and valleys and gorges, and the worst portion of the whole of the North-West Frontier Province of India. Somewhere in those hills Lenhai was doing his damndest. Sharp shooters infested the fastnesses—of which we knew little and they knew everything. We knew, however, that behind those snipers were other barbaric giants of the hills, waiting with knives drawn, ready to pounce upon a column harassed and hacked by the bullets of their sniper brothers, for this is the law of the Free Land of the Hills—the law of the knife and the gun.

The sniping stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Binns made as if to leave his hideout.

“Stay where you are!” called the Colonel.

Being more Irish than anything else, he didn't stay. He came running crazily downhill, fell, sprawled, rolled, then scurried like a hare towards the cleft in which we were sheltering. A roar of musketry burst out. The valley was alive with the peculiar *ping-pung*, *ping-pung* of the snipers. Binns tumbled in on us—unharmcd.

“Of all the mad blighters!” snorted the Colonel. “Why I had you come along——”

"But, look, Colonel," laughed Binns, his grey eyes twinkling. "What did I tell you, O, *bara sahib!*"

We stared at the spent bit of lead in his palm.

"You're right, Binns," admitted the Colonel.

"That was never fired from a Pass rifle."

Whereby hangs a tale. In that wilderness beyond the Frontier there is obviously a big demand for guns of any kind. Out of the necessity has grown the native handicraft of rifle making. The hillmen have taught themselves to bore rifle barrels and make breech blocks. Apart from tilling the land and raising fat-tailed sheep, this is the only industry among the tribes. Hence there came into being the "Pass rifle." Every man who has served on the Frontier, either with the Levies or in the regular troops, knows the Pass rifle. It is a crude weapon, but effective in the hands of the Waziris, the Afridis, the Mahsuds and the rest of the unholy tribes.

Binns's case, however, was that the hillmen were not using Pass rifles any more. They were handling modern rifles of an improved German type. The Mad Fakir was carrying on his crusade in a properly organised fashion. He was able to supply his men with up-to-the-minute rifles. In other words, there was a considerable trade in gun-running somewhere.

"And they're not coming over the Frontier, chief," opined Binns. "They're coming in the other way—from the north by way of Russia."

"Russia!" I cried.

"Sure, an' isn't that obvious?"

"Good heavens! Now I know where I've heard that accent before!"

"What're you talking about, Craven?"

I stared at the Colonel—from him to the bullet in our American friend's great paw.

"That woman, sir—Mahrila! I couldn't get her accent. Now I know. She is either a Russian or she's lived a big part of her life in Russia."

The Colonel nodded sagely. "First Bolshevik gifts of rifles. By the ton, I shouldn't be surprised. The propaganda will follow. The woman is a Russian agent."

"You said it, Colonel. Get rid of the bitch, and then ye can tackle the Mad Fakir's rough-housing."

"I'm obliged to you, Binns. You were right. But why the devil did you risk your neck to prove it? While you're with the company, you must obey orders. Understand? This puts a much more serious complexion on the Fakir's activities. He is being well backed. Wonder if it's true—this story about his having ten thousand men."

"And if they are supplied with modern breech-action rifles, sir," I added, staring curiously at the bit of lead.

"Not much doubt of that, Craven."

The Colonel's face looked grave as he peered over the boulder towards the hillside opposite. He had vowed he would get Lenhai. The Mad Fakir had sworn he would kill Colonel Strong, set fire to him, then destroy the famous company by fire and sword.

The thing had become a matter of personalities—Colonel Strong and his irregulars against Lenhai and his clansmen, a personal feud between the grey-

haired, wiry little Britisher and the red-bearded Moslem giant, national traditions and a life of military training against religious fanaticism and a lifetime of banditry. . . .

The sniping stopped. Colonel Strong turned and signalled to No. 1 platoon. Automatic guns were brought up and placed in position. A turban stuck on the end of a rifle barrel was raised an inconsiderable inch or so above the shelter of rocks. The air was suddenly filled with the crack and whine of bullets. The turban shot over our heads. Our machine guns had the range. I slipped down behind one, fingers itching to press the firing button. The deadly rat-tat-tat-tat that beats into the brain. We sprayed the breastworks behind which the snipers lay hidden. We kept it up, belt after belt, saw the chips and splinters flying, the bits of lead spattering over those stones, caught the glint in the sunlight of a rifle snout, sent it shattering skywards. The owner of that gun followed, fell from his loophole, came hurtling down the hillside like a bundle of dirty washing, rolled and bumped over the flints at the bed of the gulley, lay still.

There is a certain satisfaction, a feeling of power, in squatting behind an automatic gun with one's thumbs pressing the buttons, swinging the deadly instrument this way and that, spraying a target. . . . A boy with a new mechanical toy gets the same sort of feeling.

The border tribesmen are not easily routed. We swung our death-dealing machines at them for hours. They answered—intermittently, just to show that

they were not to be ousted by any trumpery little force of the British *raj*.

"Say, chief. Looks as if we'll be here all day?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," remarked the Colonel dryly. That was his favourite expression.

"Not very exciting. Sure now, couldn't we rush 'em?"

"Think so?"

Strong continued to stare through his binoculars at the breastworks across the hill. His dry tone betrayed his amusement with the comments of our foreign correspondent. His grizzled moustache could not hide the cynical curve of his thin lips, and there was a gleam in his cold blue eyes that boded ill for someone.

"That pepper-duster ought to get 'em sooner or later."

"I doubt if it will frighten them. These tribal wallahs live for this sort of thing. Whereas with us it is just a job of work."

Now we had all four gun crews in action—there was one to each platoon, the officer of each, or one of his native non-coms., on the firing buttons, while the sepoys fed the belts. We kept them going until well past noon, showering those breastworks with a veritable torrent of lead. Suddenly the snipers' fire ceased. We followed suit. The valley became deathly quiet, astonishingly so after that incessant snap and crackle of guns.

"They've gotten away, I guess."

Binns might be right. But how? Had they tun-nelled into those parapets—and out again? They



were adepts at that sort of thing. They crept in and out of these hillsides like moles. We sat still for a space. No sign of life in that shimmering heat haze. Not a sound. Hell's Broth Militia, a company totalling nearly three hundred men, lay crouched behind boulders as if dead. The company could remain for hours like that, soundlessly, for they, too, were natives of these parts. It felt like hours—that waiting for the next treacherous move.

The Colonel murmured an order. We were to take out a scouting party. I picked out half-a-dozen men. Binns insisted on joining the party. We emerged into the gulley in extended order, began to climb the hill. Nothing stirred up there. We went half-crouching, guns at the ready. Binns appeared to be enjoying himself. He carried a long-barrelled Mauser pistol—one of those unwieldy things that can be used rifle fashion, effective enough in the hands of the expert. He certainly knew something about guns. A bit of a dark horse, I found, when I got to know him better. Had an inquiring air that was altogether deceptive.

It was a creepy business, wondering whether those snipers had decamped or whether they waited, drawing us into a trap. When within twenty yards or so of the first hideout I ran forward. If I were to be potted, there was no point in delaying the job. I leapt the little enclosure, found four dead hillmen. It was much the same story in all of these breast-works. We had shot them to a standstill. Another score had gone to Allah. Paradise was in their eyes. To them, death promised greater joys than this

world could offer, for the Moslem heaven is filled with beautiful gardens and peopled by lovely women.

Being infidels, we took no account of this, but just hung their bullet-ridden bodies about the hillside as an example to other marauding bands. I sat down and mopped the perspiration. There was no cessation yet from the torrid heat waves. Below us, in the bed of the valley, the company was shambling into column of route order. The sight of that mob would probably have brought grins to the faces of a movie audience; but they were bonny fighters nonetheless. This was grim reality. These scallywags of the mountains who owed allegiance to the British *raj* were a rum-looking lot, fierce, shaggy, wolfish, some bearded and some seamed, some hairless boys and some ageless men; but all smitten with the same crazy hunger for the hereditary pastime of fighting.

There was little to distinguish these native soldiery from the rapscallion of the badlands of Khyber—except their uniform khaki turbans, cartridge belts of military pattern, and regulation rifles. True, they carried knives, but the cutlery was a matter of personal adornment and an ineradicable habit. They were dirty and appeared disreputable, but not without discipline. A strange company—some two hundred and fifty in the ranks, apart from the usual camp followers, and all controlled by half-a-dozen white men, the whole drawn together in a unique brotherhood, named the Kurram Militia after the river in the region of their recruiting, but famed

as Hell's Broth Militia because they were the finest fighters on earth.

"Say! D'you allow these guys to loot?"

"They're just changing their shoes," I grinned.

Our boys were engaged in relieving the dead men of their gondola-shaped sandals, wherever there was a pair better than their own. They were also adding to their stock of knives and other things.

"Well, I guess it is all part of the fighting game to these guys. What beats me is how you get 'em to fight their brother Moslems."

"That's easy. There are two sections of Moslems in these parts, Binns. There are the *Shiites* and the *Sunnites*. They loathe the sight of each other. Down by the Kurram, where most of our boys hail from, they are an entirely different sect from the people of this area. If there had ever been any real unity among the Moslem peoples the Christians of the west would have been kicked out of India, Arabia and Africa donkeys years ago."

"I get you. If Be-akle Lenhai could unite them——?"

"Precisely! Nothing in the world would stop such a gigantic sweep. As it is, he is causing us a devil of a lot of trouble. He's got thousands of Pathans so set on murdering the infidels for the greater glory of Allah that they'll now shoot or knife any stranger within their gates on sight—providing there are no police or levies or troops around. You were lucky, Binns. You had an escort of the Amir's own men. You dress like a Pathan and you look like one. You can get away with it. But less than a

month ago two European travellers, man and wife, coming through from Turkestan, were caught between military posts in the Pass. The man was strung up and horribly mutilated. His wife was pegged to a mud wall and stoned to death. They said, when we caught them, that she was a shameless wanton who went about the world unveiled, showing her face to all men. . . ."

"What did you do with 'em?"

"We could account for only four of them. They were pegged to a wall and our boys stoned them to death."

"Gosh! What a world!"

"You won't learn much about it if you run around under escort."

"That's beginning to dawn on me, Digger."

"*Sahib! Sahib! Sahib!*"

One of the sepoy came running up. He was waving what looked like a large-size tobacco pouch of transparent skin.

"*Dekko, sahib!*"

"*Ham dekta hai, tum kharab wallah.*"<sup>1</sup>

This particular native had a name. It meant "Eater of women." He had earned it. He was that sort of fellow whenever there were native girls around. I thought at first he was merely exhibiting his loot. Then I saw that this was no native article.

"Heavens! Where did you get this?"

Eater-of-Women explained that he had taken it from one of the dead Pathans.

<sup>1</sup> "I am looking, you rascal."

"Say! That's been lifted from some European traveller!"

The skin pouch contained not tobacco but a fold of thick foolscap. It had been carried by an airman flying over these hills, and it announced in *Pushtu*, *Urdu*, *Hindustani* and other languages that a ransom would be paid for the rescue of the said airman. I knew of course that airmen flying over these dangerous areas were accustomed to carrying these ransom messages—in case they had to make a forced landing or got into difficulties with hostile tribes. Men and machines captured in the more remote corners of the East had been saved on several occasions as a result of carrying these ransom notes. The tribes were sometimes content to exchange them for gold.

"That means some guy has flown over here not 'long since?"

"Yes. But this never fell from his 'plane. It's the sort of thing an aviator would have securely fixed to his person."

"He came down?"

"Made a forced landing somewhere. What the devil was this native doing with it? He couldn't have been on his way to a British post with it. We caught him in a spot of sniping."

"Yeah. Well that disposes of any idea that these wallahs are in need of gold—or the weapons they can get for gold."

"Obviously, Binns, they are being well supplied from the other border."

"Russia?"

"Doesn't it look like that?"

"Sure. But where is the guy—and where is his machine?"

"That's what we got to find out. Come on!"

We doubled down the hillside back to the column and reported the find to the Colonel. We had seen nothing of a 'plane passing over since we left the base two days ago, nor had there been any notification about an airman taking that route over the mountains.

"Maybe, sir, he was a freelance delivering a 'plane to Kabul?"

"I shouldn't be surprised, Craven." The Colonel turned to Binns. "How long since you were in Kabul, Binns?"

"Why, I guess it must be nearly three weeks."

"Did the Amir mention anything about a delivery of 'planes?"

"Not a word, chief. Sure, now, that's curious—if he was expecting a new airplane—because he showed me over his aerodrome. He had a couple of 'planes then and there was a German guy in charge. But I reckon I wouldn't trust myself in one of 'em, not after watching those native mechanics at work. Maybe the Amir was having more 'planes brought over. He was as proud as a peacock about his machines and his new aerodrome. And he was certainly taking a lot of interest in the place, at that. . . ."

"I've never known these hillmen ignore a ransom before," mused Colonel Strong. "Seems pretty clear that somebody is supplying them with ample

funds and arms. It's what I've suspected for months. Lenhai has a strong backing. All right, Craven. Go ahead with your boys and scout. You know the signal. I'll bring the column up behind you. No use looking for a wrecked airman in these regions. But we may be lucky and come on something that'll lead us to him. Meantime, we keep to the original plan—that village. All right. March!"

Binns and I went ahead with the scouts. We scoured the countryside as we trudged along, trekking across the empty country over steep stone hills, by way of dry river beds, where the air hung in long shimmering waves, while the company came up behind us in a wide crescent of extended order. And there was not a sign of life anywhere. Those snipers had dropped out of the blue. This was a dead land. Nothing grew there save the spare patches of camel thorn and weedy scrub. Night fell and we pitched camp, glad of the rest and a meal and freedom for a spell from the infernal heat.

I rolled into my sleeping bag thinking of that airman. If he had made a forced landing, we must surely find some evidences of his machine. The hillmen would have no use for it. They would smash it, burn it, or otherwise destroy it. I could imagine their savage fury—for they had known what it meant to be bombed by these great silver birds. And what of the airman? In this new campaign of no-quarter for the infidels there would be frightful mutilation and an even more horrible killing. Clearly the ransom ruse had failed for once. . . .

We were up at sunrise next morning. The night had passed without incident. No time was wasted over breakfast. We were on our way before the sun had attained any power. The air was crisp and there was a cool breeze playing about the hills. The scouting party drew ahead, eager in the search for something that would establish the evidence of a 'plane, for the Colonel had rewarded Eater-of-Women for his discovery, and his brethren were thus stimulated in their efforts. We drew so far ahead on several occasions that I found it necessary to call a halt—until we could sight the company behind us! I had no wish to become isolated with a party of six sepoys in this desolate quarter.

We topped a rise that gave us a wide panoramic view for miles around. It was magnificent! A gigantic sweep of rolling hills and dipping valleys drenched in glorious sunlight, their gaunt grey outlines dyed in vivid colours. One gasped, marvelled at such grandeur. One wondered why such beauty should adorn so cruel and barbaric a land.

And suddenly I had no further thought for the magnificence of the scene. The scouts were racing down the hillside, yelling and gesticulating with their rifles. I called to them to halt but they paid no attention. I bawled myself hoarse. The rascals ran on, tumbling and slithering down in a shower of loose flints and stones, their raucous cries breaking eerily over the echoing gullies.

"What have they spotted?"

Binns stared after them. "Search me, buddy. Their natural far-sightedness puts one over on us."



I swept the gully with my glasses, trying to follow the direction of the scampering sepoys. Then I saw away over on the other side of the valley a vague outline of some rock structure, a sort of blockhouse or disused fort set in the breast of the mountainside, nestling there like some great and natural eyrie, a fortress that might well have been constructed by nature herself. It could mean anything—or just nothing. It certainly was not a fortified village. There was no sign of life about it, no pasturing sheep or goats, neither man nor beast.

The morning air was suddenly rent by the scream of bullets. In that hollowed ravine they whined like whip thongs. The scouts had dropped for cover before I had time to yell an order. I swung round. The company tailing us was hardly discernible. If I fired the signal it would attract the attention of those bandits in the fort over there—which I'd no intention of doing. Thought sped swiftly then. Better to use the scouts to decoy. When the company came up the Colonel could manœuvre his men and surround the fort.

"I've a strong feeling that those wallahs are a part of the band we fought yesterday. We got to take some of them—alive. They may be useful.

. . ."

"Why, sure. I get you."

"Cut back to Colonel Strong and report. If we lay our hands on these swine we may learn things."

Binns turned round without a word and hurried

back the way we had come. I sat down behind a boulder. The morning was strangely quiet again. From my vantage point I could watch the valley where the scouts lay under cover and also the distant gully along which the company slowly approached. This broken country was very deceptive. It was not easy to measure distances with the naked eye, and we had got further ahead of the column than I had imagined. They were nearly an hour in coming within hailing distance. I saw Binns join up with them. They halted. I could follow the Colonel's orders as he brought the men up into column of route, then separated them—four platoons. They were now marching off in different directions, one platoon crawling up towards me with the Colonel and Binns at their head. They covered the last few yards very cautiously, on all fours.

"All right, Craven," said the Colonel, as he sank down beside me. "Binns has explained the situation. Good work, you fellows." He was scanning the country with his glasses. "I shouldn't be surprised if that old post over there is housing a part of the mob we were after yesterday. Pass the word along to your platoon to keep down under cover until the order is given for the charge. We'll hang on here until we see the other platoons heading for the fort. Then we'll charge and keep 'em occupied while the other section close in on 'em. Expect we'll have a tabasco time playing decoy. . . ."

It panned out that way. But first we had to spend the whole of that blessed morning lying

among the rubble of that mountain top, waiting for a sight of the other platoons. They had been instructed to creep around, make a detour—which meant hours of forced marching—so that the company could approach the mystery fort from all sides. By noon the sun was blazing down upon us with relentless ferocity. Even the stones around us were hot to the touch. We lay gasping, not daring to show ourselves until the order came to charge, chafing against this inaction as the hot hours crawled by. The bandits potted incessantly. But the scouts down there never showed themselves. I fancy they wondered greatly what had happened to the rest of the company, but they realised they were up against an unknown quantity sheltered behind stone walls. They were not to be drawn. Not that they waited for orders. It was just native cunning that kept them under cover—six men against a fort, and a company somewhere behind that showed no sign of life!

“Keep your gun crew ready, Mr. Craven.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Shall need 'em to cover our advance.”

“Very good, sir.”

Was there never to be any relief from the searing of this oven-top of stone? In such conditions, with nothing to do but wait and wait and keep on waiting, the passing hours seemed like years out of one's life. The picture of that vast expanse was etched into the texture of the mind—the sun-tipped hills that jagged into the brassy sky, the valleys all misty with gold, the shimmer of a heat

haze that deluded the staring eyes, that caused one to see movement where movement was not.

Unmistakable movement came at long last. We could discern creeping figures descending from an eminence above the fort, saw others crawling between boulders and patches of scrub, advancing to their objective from right and left flanks. They were closing in with deadly precision. Now was the moment for our platoon to charge down the hill to the valley where our scouts lay and up to the fort on that rise facing us—and so draw the bandits' fire!

Colonel Strong leapt to his feet, yelled the order to charge, and away we scampered down the hillside. It was fun! It was madly exhilarating after the long hours of stifling heat and stoical forbearance on that oven-top. The valley was suddenly filled with the raucous war cries of the native troops lusting for battle, while the snap and crack of rifle-fire burned through the air with increasing clamour. The boys rushed down that slope as if ten thousand devils were after them, stumbling, leaping, jumping, agile as so many monkeys, fiendishly yelling, firing from snap as they tore in and out of the rubble of flints and stones. The ravine was alive with the hoarse bawling and screeching of blood-lusting maniacs whom civilisation had hardly touched. We controlled Hell's Broth Militia only by recognising that the rank and file were not to be controlled once their fighting passions were roused.

They were rushing frantically towards the fort from all sides. It was a spectacle of undiluted

savagery and barbarism. And our men went down on all sides under the withering fire from the fort. Mostly they rose again and staggering along, determined upon a bloodthirsty finale. A mountain gun would have demolished that mud and stone fort in a few seconds. But we were a mobile column and big guns were impracticable in those stark regions of jagged hills and boulder-strewn gullies. Ours the more primitive combat of man to man such as these badlands had witnessed for centuries.

As we crossed the gully and began to climb towards our objective, the Colonel's signal blew for machine-gun action. I yelled to the gun crew. They dropped their burden, but instead of assembling the gun they ran on with their compatriots, mouthing their battle cry as they unslung rifles and joined in the fray. I yelled to them to come back but discipline had gone by the board in this insane fever of scrapping and the promise of loot.

Binns came up breathlessly and dropped down beside me. We got the gun fixed up and while he fed the belts I manipulated the firing buttons. Other automatic guns had come into action, adding to the din and racket of rifle fire and bellowing men. My companion chuckled as we got the thing into action and I aimed for the loopholes in the fort wall.

"Monarch of all he sprays," quoth he.

There was no doubt about our having the range. In a few minutes the firing from the fort began to slacken. Most of our boys had dropped for cover as soon as they heard the machine guns.

Some of them were within fifty yards of the wall. Only the fear of a bullet in the back had prevented them from scaling the fort walls and butchering those within. And now our four machine guns were in action, firing from all sides a deadly hail of lead over that mystery enclosure of mud and stone.

Suddenly the bandits' fire ceased. For a space we could but wonder what had happened within those walls. The order came to cease fire. The stuttering guns stopped. The contrasting silence shocked and held the senses. A white flag was raised above the wall. We stared at the thing as it came into view, fluttered gently in the heat waves.

We stared even harder at what followed. The bulging turbans of two of the bandits appeared above the wall. As the men came more clearly into view it was seen that they were hoisting something up. The head and shoulders of another man appeared. He was wearing a flying helmet. It was the aviator! As he was lifted further up, stiffly, woodenly, like a tailor's dummy, we saw that his arms were bound behind his back and there were rope shackles about his middle.

Some three hundred watchers lying in every sort of attitude around the slopes looking on to that wall gazed silently on this weird tableau. What dastardly trick was being played now? Was there to be mutilation and murder before our eyes while we lay helplessly watching?

The aviator was hoisted on to the wall. The wall was thick, probably several feet, making a wide platform of the crest. The two natives stood on

the top, began to drag their burden across. Then they dropped him clumsily to the ground outside the fort. The flying man's legs were free. He could walk, but only a matter of a couple of yards or so, for there was a stout rope attached to his waist, the other end being secured to the wall.

There he stood, trussed up like a mummy, staring in our direction in a dazed and stupid sort of fashion. We could but return his gaze—in a manner equally helpless. Then some thirty or forty hillmen crowded on to the wall immediately behind the bound figure. They were probably four or five feet above the man's head. They were cackling and gesticulating and guffawing among themselves. Apparently the situation tickled them immensely. And every one of them was heavily armed, each man with his rifle at the ready.

"Migosh! Are those devils going to pot at him?" gasped Binns.

I felt suddenly cold in that broiling heat. I stared in fascinated horror as a great hulking brute stepped forward towards the front of the wall, a giant among giants, saw him raise his powerful arm for the throw. A stone was flung down the slope. It came to rest within a few feet of the spot where the sepoy, Eater-of-Women, was crouching. He crawled out, snatched at the stone, and threw it towards me. When I picked it up I saw there was a message attached to it. I passed it over to the Colonel. The message was in *Pushtu* and rather over my head. But Strong knew the language. I watched his face as he read it. Just then there

was a dead silence over all that hillside. The Colonel looked across at me, steel in his blue eyes and his grey moustache positively bristling.

"These swine are ordering me to clear out of their country and stay out. If we go . . . they will set the flying man free. There's a lot of non-sense here that seems to have come from their *mullahs* (priests) to the effect that these silver birds the *ferungi* fly over their country are designed so that the infidel can look down into the sanctities of the *harim* upon their women, who unveil within the protection of their garden walls—and so forth."

"I guess this is just a part of Lenhai's campaign, chief."

"I shouldn't be surprised."

"There's no question of our going, sir—but what happens if we refuse?"

"They will open fire on us, Mr. Craven."

I gasped, stared at the Colonel.

"That means . . . ?"

"Too true, it does, Digger! It means the swobs will fire on us and we shan't be able to answer back—not with that aviator fellah stuck up there right in the line of our target."

"Good heavens! What about number four platoon—waiting behind the fort?"

"No good, Craven. They'd slaughter the poor fellow before turning round to tackle the platoon advancing from behind."

"Migosh! I'll say! In two minutes they'd fill that flying fellah so full 'o lead he'd drop from the sheer weight of it. . . . So what?"



"We could retire—and advance again later?"

The Colonel bristled.

"Retire from a handful of bandits, Mr. Craven? That is precisely the trap they're setting for us. Depend upon it, they have some scheme worked out. If we agree to clear out, they will probably suggest a rendezvous some five miles back—at which point a party will meet us and deliver the aviator. Perhaps! I know these treacherous swine too well. Can you imagine the Kurram Militia waiting at some spot a few miles back for a party of these wallahs to turn up with the flying man—as promised? A promise is swearing by Allah. But not when it is given to an infidel. And in the present state of their temper——"

We stared round helplessly, thinking fast and furiously in those precious seconds. What the Colonel said was true enough. If we agreed to retire we should never see this aviator again. Nor this party of troublesome bandits! They would never trust us to take over their captive here—and then retire!

A figure was crawling towards us. It was Lieut. Hardcastle, one of our platoon commanders. Colonel Strong explained the position. Hardcastle suggested we should yell at the aviator to drop to the ground as soon as we raced forward.

"Hardly, Mr. Hardcastle. It would be just as easy to pot at him if he lay on the ground."

"There must be some way out, sir," I said. "Supposing Lieutenant Hardcastle and I went forward with a truce flag and asked them for ten minutes to think the proposition over—and as we

came away we could take the opportunity to cut the rope that holds the fellow to the wall, and shove him down the slope as we broke away?"

"No, Mr. Craven. That would be sacrificing the lives of all three of you."

"Sure! They'd fill you as full of holes as a colander before you'd done a couple of yards. As for me—I'm one of 'em, to all appearances. That's what you fellows say, anyhow. I dress like one and look like a Pathan. I guess I could take 'em by surprise if I went forward alone. Scribble a chit in *Pushtu*, chief, and I'll take it right in amongst 'em."

"'Fraid I don't follow you, Mr. Binns?"

"My idea is to shove myself right in amongst them. They couldn't fire at me then, and as soon as I'd got in you could make the grade and be on 'em, huh?"

"If you were in amongst them they could not use their rifles," I agreed. "But as soon as they realised what was happening, they'd use their knives and cut you in little pieces before we could reach you."

"I shouldn't be surprised," murmured Strong grimly. "And, in any case, we couldn't think of using a good American citizen in that way. Thank you, Mr. Binns. It's your funeral if you insist upon coming along with us and taking the risks with us as they come along. But, as for playing a major rôle of this sort—I'm afraid not, my dear fellow."

"Well, we gotta do something. I guess those guys won't hold out much longer."

■

"I think I have the solution," whispered Strong. "The mistake would be in running away from that wall after cutting the rope. Understand? If someone went forward with a chit asking for time to think this proposition over, that someone could cut the rope—but instead of running back towards us he would run into the shelter of the wall. Those fellows could not reach him with their rifles then—not without leaning half-way over the wall, and they'd realise that the further they projected themselves over the wall to get at our man, the more vulnerable they would be as targets for us."

"But what about the aviator, sir?" asked Hardcastle. "Would he run towards the wall?"

"His natural instinct would be to run away from the wall, Mr. Hardcastle. Now, it is extremely doubtful whether any of those hillmen up there understand a word of English. That flying man may not be English; but we can call out to him in English and in French. One or other message must register. We can get the plan across to him in that way—instruct how he should move as soon as the rope is cut."

"I guess that's foolproof, chief. Who——?"

"We'll draw lots, Mr. Binns."

All this was but a matter of moments. We drew. The job fell to me. Colonel Strong was hurriedly writing a message in *Pushtu* when a startled exclamation drew our attention to the fort wall.

"Look! Migosh! Who's that guy?"

We stared. One of our boys had crawled to within a foot or two of the wall. He had made the

distance under cover of boulders and patches of scrubby tussocks. He was almost naked—the better to crawl unseen. It was Eater-of-Women! He had worked so silently, so craftily, that we had not heard him start. Only a few minutes ago he was within a yard of me and had passed over the message sent down by the hillmen.

He reached the lee of the wall and crept forward. The fellow had a knife in his teeth.

“Good heavens! He’s going to cut the rope!” I gasped.

The Colonel took in the situation at once. He yelled hoarsely to the trussed flying man standing there:

“Aviator! Aviator! The rope will be cut! Don’t run towards us. Run back to the wall and stay there!”

The message was repeated in French. The next few moments were as hectic as any I have ever experienced. At the precise second that Eater-of-Women leapt, knife in hand for the rope, the Colonel’s whistle blew. The slope was suddenly filled with the crackle and snapping of rifles and the cries of men. We fired from snap as we raced forward—the maddest sort of charge imaginable. Even as we rushed the position the snarling roar of the hillmen broke out, their rifles spat. I saw the rope give way, the aviator turn to dive towards the wall. But he collapsed before he could get there. The next minute we were covering him, firing at the group of bandits who had rushed forward to the front of the wall.

They leapt in amongst us. And that was their undoing.

There followed a regular bloodthirsty hand-to-hand scrap. Bodies seemed to be piling up around one's stumbling feet. We were jabbing and thrusting with bayonet. Savage, foaming mouths raved and cursed, called on Allah to vanquish these dogs and pigs of infidels. These sons of Mahommed never ran away. The knives of Mecca were slashing right and left. Groans and yelps mingled with their sickening raucous cries. They fought with paradise in their fanatical eyes, believing their destination to be a heaven of unlimited lovelies and insatiable passions.

Fight or fall, Allah was there in either event. For us infidels it was a mad race with death. Sweat poured, mingling with the grime and filth and stench of that scrimmage. Choking gasps of pain. Bayoneted grunts. Maniacal laughter. Grinning jowls, bearded, blackened teeth. Blood splashes. Stench, always stench. A blurred memory of a close-quarters battle of slash and thrust and parry, of twisted features, slobbering mouths, reddened knives and bayonets—ended for me by a blow on the head when I went out for the count.

I came to in the fort itself, sitting with my back to a wall of one of the houses. I can recall saying in those first bewildered moments of consciousness:

"Some idiot hit me with the boot of his gun!"

There was a familiar laugh. The grey eyes of Barney Binns twinkled at mine. A lovely sight! There was a dried crack of blood down one side of

his great jaw, but it didn't prevent him widening his jowl in an unmistakable display of tombstone teeth.

"Too right, buddy! Some idiot hit ye with the heel of his rod. It was that Eater-of-Women guy. One of these bandits was poised for a beautiful end-all jab at your midriff when he swung his rod and you and the wallah with the knife went down in a row. Gosh! It was the nearest thing I've seen this side of Gehenna!"

"Where is Eater-of-Women? Is he all right?"

"Not a scratch, Digger."

"And that airman?"

"That native doctor of yours is taking a couple out of his thigh. They say he'll be okay."

"Did the bandits get away?"

"They're flat—every damned one of 'em."

## CHAPTER III

### NABI—MOSLEM EMPEROR

WE had reached the Pass on an "open" day. Twice a week the historic highway is thrown open for the great processions of traffic travelling east and west in two gigantic streams, and then it looks as if all the camels and asses and ponies and bullock-wagons of Asia are on the move, and the *Khassadars*, the native caravan-police of the Khyber, always have their work cut out to maintain anything like order and prevent the drivers of camels and oxen, moving in opposite directions, from flying at each others' throats.

The Khyber has more than one highway. There is the military road, a wide well-built affair of concrete fashioned by the British. Another road runs more or less parallel along which the *Kafilas*, camel caravans, wend their way. At some stages, owing to the nature of the mountainous countryside, the two roads merge into one.

Our company had reached such a stage. A halt was called and we were resting by the wayside at the fork of the two highways before taking the plunge into the milling throng.

No other highway on earth could present such a spectacle. The great mass of men and beasts moving

patiently along that ancient gully between the frowning hills provides a scene that has not changed in the past two thousand years. Twenty centuries and more ago camel-strings passed this way in just the manner they do to-day, bringing cloths from Samarkand, gaily-coloured silks from Bokhara, carpets from Khiva, fruits and nuts from Kabul.

Wealthy merchants ride by, sitting astride diminutive donkeys, their lordly sandals trailing in the dust. Alongside the camels shuffle the ragged *Provindahs*, the flea-bitten and ferocious-looking gypsies of Afghan descent who for centuries have handled the trade between Central Asia and India. There are stalwart Pathans treading the thick dust with the bearing of kings, veiled women in close-fitting velvet jackets and baggy pantaloons of scarlet silk, riding Kabuli ponies with a poise that is admirably regal. And there are pack-laden mules carrying bedding, pots and pans, chickens, lambs, ducks, dogs, bundles of corn and vegetables. All enveloped in a thickening cloud of dust. Over all a raucous humming, the truculent blaspheming of men, shrill cries of children, the grunt and grumble of loping beasts, the sharp commands of the watchful police.

The conglomeration of vociferous folk and swaying beasts stretched as far as the eye could reach, filling the air with a strife of tongues and clouds of dust that reached up to the grey façades of the hills. A string of some forty camels bound for Peshawar loped into view, met a cluster of asses and bullocks making the eastward journey. In a flash the opposite streams were inextricably mingled. Utter confusion.



The babel of sound rose high in the air, camels grunted and squealed, asses brayed, oxen lowed in distress.

The veiled women were screaming and gesticulating wildly. *Provindahs* ran about belabouring their beasts, yelling the curses of Allah at all and sundry, creating greater confusion. A handful of *Kassadars* dived into the heart and centre of the *mêlée*, smiting right and left with their iron-shod staffs. In a few seconds they had restored order. The two opposite streams continued as before, splashing up the fine dust, lumbering, swaying, loping nonchalantly on.

The heat was intense, as if the air were afire, the heat haze brittle and ashimmer like hot gas. Nowhere else have I experienced such heat—not even in the centre of Arabia, the Soudan, the Persian Gulf, or even the islands along the equator. Was that the reason why the manners and modes of these people had remained untouched by civilisation for two thousand years? Was that the reason for their ferocious mental outlook, their incessant blood feuds, their hot-blooded temperament, their wild, ungovernable ways of living? Was that why they believed in a heaven of luxuriant green swards, sylvan shades, flowing streams of cooling nectar?

The feudal Orient is dying out, they say. The princes and the khans, the freebooting robber bands, the *harims* and the hidden dens of vice and corruption are becoming things of the past—if only the recent past. It is not true of the wild hilly country beyond the North-West Province of India. The

wild uplands of the Khyber country remain unchanged. So indeed does Afghanistan itself. There was once a ruler named Amanullah who set himself to introduce the customs and modes of civilisation. He now hides in Europe and dare not return.

In the freelands beyond the Pass the clansmen maintain the old order rigidly. The khans and the princes still rule on the lines of the old models. With them and against them, but mostly with them, are the hereditary peasants, slaves, eunuchs, merchants, noblemen, camelteers, dope-smugglers, gun-runners, thugs, bandits, and the veiled ladies of the *harim*, who, should occasion arise, can be more bestial, bloodthirsty and barbarous than their men-folk.

All of them, in their hearts, are anxious enough to preserve the Oriental customs and traditions, to identify themselves with the conditions that obtained when Alexander the Great came this way, when the Parthians, the Scythians, the White Huns passed with their battling hordes, when Timar the Tartar rode down this funnel of High Asia and swept with his massed ranks like a prairie fire across the plains of Northern India.

The border tribesmen still dream of emulating these wild ancestors. It is still a part of their religion that they shall gird themselves for the call to battle, for the bloody descent upon the temples and palaces of the idolaters and infidels—"and when the sacred months are passed, kill all those who join other gods to God wherever ye shall find them . . . seize them, besiege them, lay wait for them. . . ." So sayeth the Koran. And unlike the Christian, the

Moslem believes in every word of his bible, literally and without reservation. These giants of men who inhabit the great expanse of unadministered territory beyond the Frontier, who owe allegiance neither to Afghan Amir nor to British *raj*, are imbued from birth with the teachings of the Koran.

No one knows this better than the British. Nearly a century of blood and strife has gone to the acquiring of this knowledge. That is why the Khyber Pass, the gateway to India with his fecund millions and untold riches, is so jealously and efficiently guarded.

Unrest was always a feature of the life of the hill country. There was never any cessation and therefore never any relaxation for the watchful guards. And now, with the Mad Fakir working upon the feelings of these religious, superstitious and emotional hill folk, the air of tensity ever present in these regions seemed to become more and more oppressive.

The storm burst suddenly and unexpectedly in the Khyber itself. Its centre was a party of border tribesmen, whose green turbans and the curved knives of Mecca stuck in their *kummerbunds* proclaimed them *hadjis* returning from a pilgrimage to the Holy City.

They rode Kabuli ponies, sleek, well-groomed animals, and at their head a young boy of not more than nine years sat a white pony with the bearing and hauteur of a prince. There was something about that party of rich nobles that drew one's attention immediately the riders came into view round the bend of the road. The passing throng

recognised the pilgrims, and a hoarse cheering broke out. Yells of acclamation rose on all sides. The mob about the riders thickened. The young boy in his green silk turban and white satin robes drew the milling mob like a magnet. Dirty paws stretched out to touch his glistening robes. Men cried the blessings of Allah upon him. In a few moments the Pass was completely blocked by the excited, vociferous and gesticulating mass. The traffic came to a standstill.

A number of *Kassadars* came hurriedly on to the scene headed by their captain. It was obvious that the native police officer had realised the delicacy of the situation. His men refrained from using their staffs. Their raucous orders to break up and let the traffic proceed were ignored. They were received with jeers. Men spat insulting remarks about those who accepted the bribes of the British *raj*. For moments it was touch and go. We jumped to our feet and ran to the edge of the road to look down upon the swaying, pushing crowd. One experienced then that vague feeling of uneasiness which precedes every momentous conflict.

"I wouldn't be surprised if there was trouble down there," opined the Colonel. "Better stand by."

There was a piercing blast. Hell's Broth Militia fell in—all except the section in charge of our wounded, which included a young aviator on a stretcher slung between mules whose fate was still very much in the balance.

The position down below was becoming more serious every moment. There seemed little hope

now of those *Kassadars* being able to quieten the mob. Bloody revolution, "holy wars," have been started with less cause than this, I thought, as I stared down on the fanatical mob. Then it was just a sea of waving arms, turbanned heads, stamping frightened beasts. The dust rose in dense clouds. The clamour grew more and more heated.

"Well, I guess those green turbans started something, huh?"

"Unfortunately, the blame will be put upon the *Kassadars*," remarked Strong.

The Colonel issued his orders. Two platoons marched down the road, leaving the remainder to care for the wounded by the roadside. We would have preferred to march on to Peshawar, handicapped as we were with about forty more or less seriously wounded men; but this was something that could not be ignored. It only required the mob to overpower that handful of native police—and anything might happen at any time.

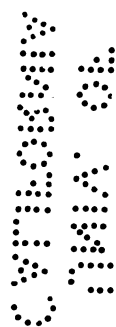
We turned the bend at the foot of the road where it forked into the traffic highway, opened ranks, and marched straight into the seething, milling throng. We must force a way out for that party of pilgrims at all costs. Angry snarls, menacing cries, truculent curses met us as we thrust our way through. No man can know what jostling, thrusting, turbulent crowd is capable of until he has been in the midst of a howling rabble of Moslems. The treacherous, slitting knife that cannot be seen, nor the perpetrator detected, the sudden blow from one of a hundred upraised arms, with weapon concealed in a



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tribesman's wide-sleeved blouse—these and other crafty devices added to our number of wounded long before we had pressed a way through to that party of pilgrims.

Native policemen's heads were cracked and bleeding. Some had gone down and were trampled underfoot. Yet no *Kassadar* had used his staff. The captain was still standing as we forged ahead. One could hear his raucous voice above the swelling roar. For several amazing minutes pandemonium ruled, hell was let loose. The thin veneer of civilisation had dropped from these fanatical border tribesmen.

It was their boast that they were the freest men on earth. It is true. Certainly there was no restraint in their demeanour during that memorable hot afternoon. One had a horrible close-up of sweating brown faces, black beards splashed with saliva, features twisted atrociously, passions unleashed. . . . Had the Mad Fakir been at hand then, nothing in the world would have stopped these madmen from careering wildly to their own destruction.

When I saw the knife raised towards the silvery head of our commander I went cold. A surging mass several feet thick separated us. I yelled—even louder than the venomous devils around me. A sepoy slashed. A brown hand sped through the air with knife still clutched in its grip, severed at the wrist as if it had been so much putty. The would-be assassin must have been astonished at the sudden loss of a hand.

I saw the tightened-up wiry figure of our commander swing round. But for that flashing knife he



would have been half a second too late to escape. He was so close that the gory stump, hurriedly withdrawn, brushed his white hair. It was a terrifying tip-and-tuck episode that clings to the memory, the grim details of which remain as vivid as on the day of its happening.

The incident was immediately buried in the jam of jostling bodies. It was but a matter of seconds. Women continued to scream. The surging and bawling did not cease. Moslem unity was not yet. Men of warring factions were taking the chance to vent their spleen, to fan the flames of tribal feud. It became a free-for-all squabble in which crafty knife-play was the chief pastime.

And the stench. The stench of a massed throng of easterners in a temperature of 127 in the shade is indescribable. It must be experienced to be believed. It is like no other human contact. Nor animal. The effluvium of the bazaar is concentrated in every one of these creatures—added to which are the habits of the hashish-doped hookah, bhang, toddy, and worse, vices which not only leave their ineffaceable marks but carry their own peculiar aroma. Astonishingly, the resultant smell fascinates whilst it nauseates.

At one moment it looked as if the riot might develop into a massacre. That historic mountain gorge, the battle ground of many blood-lusting hordes in the days when civilisation was unknown, once again echoed with the cries of maddened men. Never shall I forget that appalling scene. The Pathan does not make war on women. But during that

memorable afternoon the women whose mounts could not stampede quickly enough were thrown, trampled upon, by great masses of swaying, surging men.

Hell's Broth Militia had come into its own, for there was a veritable hell's broth around us. It seemed an age that we fought our way towards the green turbanned pilgrims whose prancing steeds lifted them above the mob. To think that all this had its genesis in an over-enthusiastic reception for the *hadjis*! Knives flashed and were sent hurtling through the air. So far there had been no gun-fire. Sticks and staffs and stones, the ever-ready knife and the curved dagger of Mecca—these played havoc enough in all conscience.

Gradually we drew near our objective, closed in around the pilgrims, then started to force a way forward. Colonel Strong was at the head of the forward movement, using his revolver-butt against all who impeded his progress, while he roared his commands in *Pushtu* that could be heard above the din of yapping maniacs.

Then, above all other sounds came the shattering snap of rifles. A cloud of dust resolved itself into a detachment of troops coming up at the double. They had fired in the air to warn the rioters of their presence. That volley of fire crashed into the mob with a most sobering effect. Men who a moment before were struggling and fighting in a rage of blind blood-lust now dropped their arms, turned from each other with sullen eyes, like so many youngsters robbed of their game, and began to collect their baggage, their families and their beasts.

The slashed and the slain were dumped down at the roadside. Something resembling a field dressing station was set up. The place was become a shambles—goods and chattels, broken bullock wagons, scattered foodstuffs and provender, the wreckage of battle was strewn all over the roadway. Wary dogs fought over dead ducks and chickens—until their owners came along and dispersed the scavengers with merciless kicks and blows. Women and children wept and men cursed, but gradually order was restored. The two streams of traffic started to move once more. The *hadjis* with the boy in white at their head—miraculously untouched—passed disdainfully on in the care of a detachment of British troops. In an incredibly short space of time the caravans, the donkeys and the rumbling carts were moving along in steady procession, as if indeed there had never been anything in the nature of a riotous assembly that hot afternoon.

But for us that was by no means the end. We were to hear a great deal more of those *hadjis* and their boy leader. We were to learn of his might and power in the land, of his association with the fanatic, Lenhai, and his even more mysterious attachment for Mahrila.

We journeyed back to Peshawar with all possible speed. We knew there was much more to this incident of the young boy and his Mecca brethren than first met the eye. There was far too much of Allah in the air at this time. Unrest was patent. We reached Peshawar with our wounded. The young aviator died there. He went without being able to

tell us anything of his going. What happened to him while in the hands of the fanatics of the hills we could but guess at. Why he went there or what became of his machine we did not then know.

But we knew of a way of gaining information about that mysterious boy. On the outer confines of Peshawar there is a famous caravanserai used by the travellers of all High Asia. It is a large, walled enclosure that will accommodate hundreds of caravans of all descriptions. There the merchants, the *provindahs*, the pilgrims, the merchandise and the camels, donkeys and bullock wagons are housed before passing on either to Peshawar, the Paris of the Pathans, or across Afghanistan and Central Asia. It was as much a gathering place of the Faithful as Mecca itself.

There we returned after seeing to our wounded at the Peshawar garrison—four of us, Colonel Strong, Hardcastle, Binns and myself. We went to the serai in the guise of lousy *provindahs*, for obvious reasons. Once within the gates, we separated. I wandered around the throng in the crowded serai. I sat at one of the booths that lined the walls and ate *shashlik*—tasty bits of lamb roasted on skewers over charcoal fires—I, in short, stopped, looked and listened. I sat down within earshot of a group of Afridis squatting in a circle round a fire of camel-dung.

It was a night of unusual experiences. The air was filled with the rumble of chattering natives, and the unmistakable aroma of burning dung. I sat with my back to the group, ventilators on the wind. Scraps of conversation floated my way. I had been

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there several minutes, munching mutton, when I had the sudden feeling that one of those voices was vaguely familiar. True, the owner of that voice spoke *Pushtu* like a native. But there was just that little something in the cadence which only a westerner familiar with European languages would detect.

I turned slightly, chanced an eye, saw the green turban. It had not been there when I sat down. Barney Binns was taking a devil of a risk. Our presence here was risky enough in all conscience. The fellow must be crazy, I thought. I knew he was expert in the local patois, even in the *lingua franca* of the serai itself, but that was not sufficient reason for shoving his head right into the tiger's teeth.

I confess I sat there in some trepidation. There was no law within the serai except that of the Pathan and his Moslem brethren. One false move and friend Binns would be cut into little pieces. It would all be over long before the alarm could be raised and the Militia brought to the rescue. And the reckless fellow went from risk to further risk.

We had remonstrated with him about wearing that green turban in the first place. But he had claimed that he knew Mecca and could answer any questions about the pilgrimage. Well, the green turban was doing what one might have expected in such a gathering. It is worn only by those who have made the journey to the Holy City. Naturally it drew many questions about Mecca from this group of Afridis. Every Moslem who has yet to make the pilgrimage will listen for hours to those who have!

I stared through the gloom at the flickering fires, at the groups of natives and slumbering beasts, at a hundred smoke spirals that rose straight into the air—and wondered what was to happen next. Sooner or later, I thought, this fellow Binns would find himself cornered, unable to answer some delicate query about the sacred city. Or would he? I did not learn until after that breath-taking experience that Binns had actually made the Pilgrimage. He had been to Mecca disguised as a good Moslem of Syria. He had performed the various ceremonies. He had then returned to his beloved United States and written a book about his experience!

But, just then, squatting there and listening to his throaty descriptions, my hand was never far from the knife-hilt. To put it mildly, I perspired. His voice was calm, untroubled, answering each curious Afridi with the swaggering assurance of one who had complied with the decree of Mahomet—to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime.

I gathered that he was trying to work the talk around to the incident of the day before when trouble had arisen about the party of pilgrims in the Pass. But it seemed that his audience, which had gradually increased, was too interested in his descriptions to bother about the Khyber episode. The trouble with Binns was that he never seemed to treasure the life he carried in his hands. He warmed to his subject, went on and on until I could have screamed at him for a fool!

He was no fool. Had I known that he had experienced the things of which he talked I should

have spent a for more comfortable half-hour. As it was, I had to listen with nerves on edge . . . and marvel at his ingenuity! But, try as he would, he could not get the conversation centred on that party of pilgrims and the strange, handsome boy who accompanied them.

He was still a good Moslem of Syria. That was why his listeners, at least those curious enough to trouble about his accent, had accepted him in all good faith. He was supposed now to be travelling about the world at the expense of a father who was a wealthy merchant of Damascus. Apparently he was not an author and traveller for nothing! Once—his wandering eyes caught mine. I fancied I detected a mischievous gleam, or was it the flicker of the firelight? Damn the Irish in him, quoth I, in the privacy of my mind. Well, he had walked right into this jam with his eyes wide open. It would be interesting to see how he got out again!

His chatter became more wild. Soon he was mouthing seditious claptrap like a pukkah fanatic. He was telling his audience that the Faithful of Arabia were ready to strike the blow for Allah. What were the Moslems of Afghanistan and India doing? Nothing! He taunted them. He sneered at their impotence. Obviously, the fellow was having the time of his life! More people joined the party. A veiled woman knelt by his side, stared into his animated face. He was aware of her presence, but he did not pause. There were other veiled women in the throng now gathered about him. Men growled, women stared through their veils—and that is always

tantalising to the man who cannot see the feminine eyes that gaze into his, nor their expression. But I could have sworn that that woman was admiring him. There was that indefinable something in the way she lifted her head towards him, the movements of her soft hands. . . .

Never in my life have I met such a crazy dare-devil as Barney Binns—and I've known a few. He played on the emotions of that group surrounding him as a violinist plays on the strings of his fiddle. He swayed them this way and that. He described in tones intensely dramatic the trekking of hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to the Holy City. He told them that the Moslem world was ready, that the Faithful throughout the world looked now to the people of Hindustan, to the Afghan, the Afridi, the Mahsuda, the Wasiris and all the tribal branches of the Pathan. Were they ready?

"Aye!" came the throaty rumble from a score or two of wild-eyed natives.

And what did they do to prepare . . . just talk! They talked and talked like children!

Suddenly another voice rose above the rumbling crowd:

"Thou shalt see, O Brother of the Faithful! We do more than talk. We prepare! Hast not thou heard of the meeting?"

A dead silence followed. It endured for several agonising seconds. The voice that had put the query was the voice of Colonel Strong. I knew it! Barney Binns knew it. His pause was the most critical phase of the whole episode. In that sudden



and terrifying silence I held my breath. Binns realised, as I did, that the Colonel, dressed also as one of the Faithful, had merely made a knock at a venture. We knew nothing about any projected meeting! I am sure the Colonel did not. But his daring was not to be outwitted by that of any Irish American!

Our commander had shot his wad. But had he hit the target? That weird silence! It seemed to stretch out for a timeless period. I stared fascinated at the glowering faces, the sullen eyes, the craftily-twisted features. The veiled woman crouching beside Binns made that tell-tale gesture of putting hand to mouth.

It was Strong himself who broke the silence.

"O, Brother from over the seas, even now we kindle the flame in the hills that is to spread and spread until it burns down into the plains!"

Well, I thought, there's nothing like hitting the nail plump on the head and driving it home! The throng of simpletons took up the cry—"Aye! Aye! We kindle the flame!"

Then up spoke a *mullah*. His head was shaved. His eyes burned like live coals. His face was lined and seamed. He was as emaciated as a Khyber jackal. He spat fire and venom with every word he uttered. He was the most fanatical of all these fanatics. He gave the whole show away. In his wrath and his rage he told the brother from over the seas that the Moslems of High Asia were indeed preparing. There was indeed a meeting. The brother must attend. He would learn that the

Pathan was just as ready for the Day as his Arabian brothers.

The Colonel's hazard was an excellent one. His shot in the dark had gone home. We learned there and then of the secret meeting of the Faithful that was to take place in Peshawar. It was being so well guarded that the British *raj* could know nothing of it, could not enter it if they did know—the spawn of swine! The lean jackal mouthed a blue streak of brimstone vituperation that positively sizzled my ear drums. *Pushtu* is a wonderful language for the blasphemous! Scurrilous epithets in the name of religion are nine-tenths of the average hillman's vocabulary.

No man could enter this secret meeting who was not in possession of the password. It was whispered into the ear of the brother from overseas, otherwise one Barney Binns. That, as Uncle Sam's nephew said a little while later, was all we wanted to know!

*Nabi!* Whatever Nabi might mean was for us to find out. But it was the key that would open the door to quite a lot of valuable information, and that was all that mattered for the moment. I hung around a while. Binns was now complaining of his weariness. He hinted that he would be pleased to retire. His brethren would hear from him again. I didn't doubt that! Then he gave them the Peace of Allah and shuffled away into the gloom.

The four of us met beyond the serai gates. Strong was immensely pleased with the night's work.

Binns was still chuckling. And while we were congratulating ourselves, Hardcastle made the discovery that we were being followed—and by a woman, a veiled woman.

"Yeah? So what? Mebbe it's that dame who was snuggling up to me when I was yapping back there."

"I wouldn't be surprised," grinned Strong.

"Perhaps she's fallen for you, Binns," I laughed.

"Well, I guess the wench has taste."

"It wouldn't be a trifle of spying, what?" queried Hardcastle.

We stepped along in silence for a space. Thought sped swifter than footsteps then. I, especially, was thinking of another woman, a woman with the queerest trace of a Russian accent in her lisping *Pushtu*. It might be Mahrila. On the other hand, she might be many miles away. Just the same, we could not afford to run any risks.

By this time we were moving around the darkened alleys of Peshawar's more unsavoury quarter. Obviously we could not go to a certain shop owned by a friendly Babu, change into military rig, and emerge on to the street again with this mysterious creature tailing us.

"If we don't shake her off," murmured Strong, "she'll ruin everything—spy or no spy."

"Well, sir," persisted Hardcastle, "what does a veiled woman want to wander about the streets for at this time of night?"

That was sound enough. What on earth were we to do with her? Hardcastle was suddenly inspired.

"She may not be a woman at all, sir!"

"Too right, buddy! She may be just a nice slender boy!"

Binns was being facetious again.

"Think I'm dumb, Hardcastle? If it's the dame who rolled up against me back there in the serai—well, I guess I know the feel of a woman!"

"Well, we'll take your word for it, Mr. Binns," commented the Colonel. "Supposing it is the woman who was interested in you at the serai—what then? She's still interested. The wench won't let us go home. Why, bless me, she isn't more than a hundred yards behind us. Following the green turban. She's either a fool or a spy. A sensible woman wouldn't walk the streets at this hour. Very well. Keep marching till we reach the Babu's door. We'll all go in except you, Mr. Binns. . . ."

"I'm being left with the baby?"

"Something like that. You engage her in conversation, grab her, drag her inside. Agent or lunatic, we must take care of her until this meeting is over. I'm not having it spoiled by a woman."

And it was so. We continued our pace with never a pause, up one dirty alleyway and down another, until we drew level with the darkened doorway of the Babu's shop. It all went according to plan. Three of us disappeared inside, leaving Binns to, as he so jocularly remarked, "hold the baby." He did not hold her very long. We were squatting in a room at the back of the shop, enjoying a sample of the Babu's cigarettes, when the big

American thrust himself in with a struggling woman in his arms. He had effectively silenced her by twisting the cloak about her head.

"Anybody see you?"

"Not a chance, chief."

He tore the woman's cloak away, grabbed at her veil and tore that too. Metaphorically speaking, I leapt.

"Mahrila!"

She stood and faced the four of us, a sneer on her otherwise pretty mouth. She continued to stand at gaze while four men admired her insolence, the devil in her smouldering eyes. Everything about that slender, small-boned figure was burned into my memory, bitten into it by ants.

"Hum! The Mad Fakir's lady, Mr. Craven. Interestin'."

"Yes, sir. Very."

"You see what happened about your very excellent *Pushtu* tongue, Mr. Binns?"

"True, chief. I guess this Russian dame detected my western accent."

On the word "Russian" Mahrila's face had darkened for an appreciable second.

"When you gentlemen have finished fooling, perhaps you will allow me to go on my way."

"Speaks good English, too! I'm afraid we can't do that, my dear. We like you so much that we are going to keep you."

"You wouldn't dare!"

The Colonel's eyebrows rose. "Is that so? Listen, my good woman. There are a few things

we'd like to inquire into regarding your presence in this country. It seems you associate with the more troublesome of our agitators. Why? Over the border and beyond the Pass we have no jurisdiction. But you are now in Peshawar, which is in the North-West Province of India. You will be detained."

Mahrila turned and made as if to dash out of the room, but Binns was too quick for her. He held her in his arms while she struggled and bit and kicked.

It was not a pretty picture. Strong clapped his hands and the Babu appeared. His orders were to take care of the woman. She was to be detained for inquiries. For a fat man that Babu possessed considerable strength. He took the struggling woman from Binns and carried her out.

After which we changed our garb and returned to quarters.

The meeting which so intrigued us took place three days later. Binns had received the fullest details as to rendezvous and time. He went alone, but we stalked him, again dressed as natives. He found no difficulty in getting inside. Nor did we. We had the password—*Nabi*!

We heard little else but *Nabi* that night. The word was on everyone's tongue. It seemed to be more in evidence than the ever-ready Allah. We found ourselves in a large underground warren, a sinister sort of dive about which, apparently, the authorities of Peshawar knew nothing. There was an immense circular room, fashioned after the

manner of an amphitheatre, with a raised dais in the centre. The air of the place was hot, heavy, fetid with the stench of great flares and the reeking presence of hundreds of sweating easterners. None of that gesticulating, humming throng took any notice of us. We were accepted. Which was just as well. We were four against something like four hundred. Had our true identity been revealed, we should have been torn to pieces by the mob. True, the whole plan was known to the Commandant of the area, but though the authorities knew of our mission we had been left to carry it out ourselves.

We inched our way towards Binns, who was squatting on the floor with some of his cronies of the serai around him, again holding forth in as seditious a manner as he knew how. We dropped on our haunches nearby. This would be amusing, I thought, if it were not so infernally risky, if friend Binns, for instance, would not persist in having his mouth wide open. Of course he was enjoying himself. He was the sort of fellow who could have fun fooling around a powder barrel in the dark with a lighted match.

I looked round at the crowd, all men, faces running with sweat, animated, excited, flashing eyes in dark faces, shaven heads and bearded faces, young boys and aged patriarchs; but all inspired by the same genesis of an idea—the coming Moslem Empire! In all of them hate, hate that was to be fanned into red hot flames during this hectic night by the *mullahs* and the priests, hatred of the dogs of masters who had ruled over Hindustan for nearly a century.

And these dogs of infidels, they said, were soon to be driven back to their miserable little kennel across the seas. Such was the general trend of the conversation—talk, talk, talk, and more talk.

And then the real talker came. He was seen advancing towards the dais in the centre of the room. In that long flowing white robe he looked a veritable giant of a man. When he ascended the dais he positively towered. Gradually the murmur of voices died down. The man with the commanding presence waited. His entrance had been theatrical. His gestures as he slowly revolved and gazed down upon the throng were utterly dramatic. But there was something about the man that commanded respect, reverence even. One could see that in the faces of his audience.

It was Be-akle Lenhai, the Mad Fakir. How had he reached Peshawar? He must have been smuggled into the city. He would leave it by the same methods. And we could do nothing about it! We dared not leave now. Even if one of us could get away to report the fellow's presence in Peshawar, preaching sedition, to attempt his arrest here and now with this excited crowd around him would mean a riot, a massacre, perhaps a revolution in Peshawar. I glanced at the Colonel. He knew who this central figure was, for the magic name was whispered awesomely as the great one entered the room. Strong shook his head ever so gently, and I knew he had been thinking on much the same lines as I. This was not the time to arrest Lenhai, and certainly not the place.



There was something of fear mingling with the crowd's reverence for this giant of a leader. "May you perish by fire!" The Mad Fakir's answer to all who would not be swayed by his crazy rantings. A score of villages had been laid waste at his command. Men, women and children had been brutally butchered. Under the powerful flares his eyes glistened with that same piercing intensity I had seen while undergoing the tortures of the ant-hill. They had an uncanny concentration of callous brutality. They stilled the vociferous throng at his feet. They were macabre fascination to this crowd of fantastic misfits.

And below the eyes that betrayed his mental derangement—the ragged beard tinged with henna, the long flowing white robe that increased a height and bulk already immense even for a native of the hills. A commanding figure mentally afflicted by the directing hand of Allah. No wonder these crazy folk revered yet feared him!

There was dead silence for a long space. Then his voice crashed out. *Nabi* has returned. That was what he said, and the madmen around him burst into a roar of acclamation. We were soon to learn that these folk had *Nabi* on the brain.

*Nabi* had returned from Mecca. *Nabi* had made his pilgrimage to the Holy City and was now ready to lead the army of the Faithful against the infidels. It was something of a shock to four of us in that crowd to learn that the mighty Lenhai was abdicating in favour of another!

He was telling this wild mob about *Nabi*. *Nabi*

was to be the emperor of the Moslem empire. The more he talked about Nabi and the wilder the audience grew. They rose to their feet and yelled themselves hoarse. The very name was magic to them. They cried it to high heaven, with waving arms and turbans flung into the air; and of course there were four men of the west who rose and did the same, bawling Nabi! Nabi! Nabi! like someone demented.

The Mad Fakir told them then of the vast army that waited in the hills for the call. Nabi had arrived safely, had taken his place at the head of this mythical army of crusaders. Vast quantities of arms and ammunition were coming over the hills from a country of which they all knew, a country that was helping them because of the belief that all people should be free. The gigantic Islamic Revolution for freedom from the yoke of the white infidels was to have its beginning in the hills. It would be led by Nabi, their ruler, the emperor who would eventually be acclaimed by the two hundred and fifty million Moslems throughout the world.

And as I looked round on the wildly excited mob I realised for the first time that if ever the Moslems were really united they would sweep all before them. Nothing could stop them, for they were primed with blood-lust against all who "joined god to god," who worshipped any other god but that of Mahomet's own devising.

When Lenhai uttered his warning, however, we were made aware of the identity of this mysterious Nabi, for the Mad Fakir was angrily berating those

who had so foolishly shown their enthusiasm for the Nabi when he had passed through the Kyber with his escort. Nabi was the handsome boy who had, all unwittingly, caused something of a riot in the Pass a few days ago.

This nine-years-old child who had just returned from Mecca was to be the ruler of the coming Moslem Empire! And a little child shall lead them! That was how Lenhai was getting his maniacal message over. With the child as a symbolic figure of the Faith, the Mad Fakir was to unite the Moslems of all High Asia.

This new move was serious. It was so serious that something in the nature of a communique was issued next day in the various garrisons and military posts. Contrasted with the wildly enthusiastic assembly we had witnessed, it was almost amusing:

There is an air of tensy along the Frontier and in the hills beyond. It would appear to indicate that trouble of a serious character is close at hand. This calls for the exercise of every precaution. All leave is postponed. Units will hold themselves in readiness at this stage.

## CHAPTER IV

### TRICKED BY THE MAD FAKIR

AFTER that meeting of Moslems we turned our attention to Mahrila. She had escaped. The Babu was dead, strangled. It must all have happened while we were at the meeting. It did not seem possible that Mahrila had committed this dastardly crime. Morally she might well have been capable of it; but she had not the physique for such a task. The Babu was a big fellow, heavily built, and surprisingly strong. Mahrila had been rescued by friends. Strangulation is a fairly common form of murder in the north of India.

Doubtless the woman had fled to the hills—to join Lenhai and perhaps Nabi. A pretty trio indeed! In a short time Hell's Broth Militia was also back in the hills. We now had the measure of our enemies and it was clear there would be no rest for the Frontier while these were at large.

We trekked towards the Mohmand. We might be on a wild-goose chase, but it was in this wild country that Lenhai had been at work when I made contact with him. We left the Pass and took the road to the north-east. We were back where we had started—before the rescue of an aviator had upset our plans, and our objective was a village the

name of which we didn't even know. In a blind pursuit of this sort it is leadership that matters, not just winning battles.

All over the Frontier there were levies, irregulars and regular troops engaged as we were—scouring the countryside, intent upon making contact with the army led by a boy of nine years, or his sponsors Lenhai and Mahrila. But our unit was different from most others. It could only be kept intact by a plentiful supply of excitement and action. Inactivity, just trekking over cast-iron country was not enough for these rascals of ours. Give them too much of a quiet time and they would show their discontent in desertions, insubordination and general disintegration.

It was during these patient, plodding hours of the trek that Strong's leadership showed itself. He could scent trouble a mile away. He had the power to make these scallywags so respect him and his authority that they'd temporarily forget their idle hands and keep moving like real soldiers. On this occasion he kept them hoofing for two days through blinding heat over hilly roads of a deadly monotony, during which we did not come upon a single sniper.

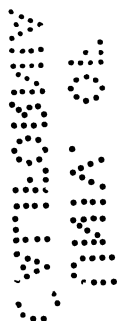
We were up at dawn of the third day and the monotonous trekking seemed once more to be the order of the day. Then came a diversion and I sighed with relief. We had emerged from a gorge on to a rock plateau and there on the skyline was a column of smoke belching heavenwards. The sight of that black spiral was enough for our boys.



[*Topical Press*]

NATIVE IRREGULARS AT THE FORT OF LANDI KOTAL, NEAR THE KHYBER PASS

[Facing page 86]



Their eyes brightened. Lagging feet began to step more jauntily. They broke into song—a battle chant of their forefathers and as old as these hills, a terrible dirge to me but an expression of sheer joy to them.

Scouts were sent on ahead to investigate with Hardcastle in charge. Presently they returned to report that a village had been fired. We went forward at the double. As we drew nearer dense volumes of smoke showed on the horizon. There was no sign of life as yet. We halted within hailing distance. The heat rising from the wrecked village was so intense that we had to pull up sharply. The stench of acrid fumes filled the air.

“May you perish by fire!” Clearly we were on his trail. More of the Mad Fakir’s work. A loyal village had gone to its doom. And the inhabitants? Were they all dead? The Colonel stared at the wreckage. His face was set, cold, unemotional, an ice-glare in his blue eyes. There was silence for a space while the crowd of us stayed put and gazed in fascinated horror at the ashes of the village. We could discern the remnants of the hovels that had housed the villagers, the skeleton outlines of buildings, the charred and blackened booths of the bazaar, and a great heap of smouldering debris—probably the household goods of the villagers.

Strong fired his revolver into the air. The effect was electrical. A strange group of people emerged from the ruins away on our left flank. They approached us slowly, distrustfully as it seemed, in a straggling sort of procession, men



for the most part, and one or two cowed-looking women. One rarely saw such a wretched group. At their head was a grey-bearded old man, bent with age, wrinkled face and rheumy eyes filled with tragedy and suffering.

It was he who told us what had happened. Our surmise was correct. The Mad Fakir had passed this way. The villagers had refused to be dictated to by the self-styled prophet. They had paid. Lenhai had turned his mob loose upon the place thereafter wholesale rape, butchery, pillage and arson. It was a ghastly tale the old man told. He had seen from his house how women and children had been violated and then slaughtered. He and these others had remained hidden even while their homes were fired. Some had died in making a tardy escape from the burning buildings. . . . Some of the younger girls were carried off by the "Holy Crusaders."

These fifteen were all that was left of a once-thriving village. They led us round the broken walls to where the gates had once stood. We entered, came upon death sprawled in every sort of grotesque attitude. Women pegged to the earth in a manner too beastly to detail. Children, boys and girls, with every scrap of clothing torn from their backs, tied in bundles of death, men spread-eagled against the walls, pinned with knives, their mouths and eyes stuffed with sand—the unmistakable marks of the demented beast, Lenhai. Death and desolation everywhere, only the vultures and the kites and the pariah dogs were alive . . . feeding.

We passed through the wreckage of the streets and the houses, where goods and chattels of all sorts had been strewn about and were now only smouldering and charred heaps, and on to the house of the Khan. This was intact only because it was built of great blocks of stone. It stood on a mound near the north wall, high up and overlooking the whole village, as is the fashion of such headmen's houses in these queer habitations of the hills.

A stout wall ran round the courtyard of the house, several feet thick and heavily buttressed, with embrasures and loopholes above for the guards. On these walls men lay crumpled up where they had fallen while trying to protect their master and his household, some with heads clubbed to pulp, others with tummy ripped open and filled with stones, an atrocity perpetrated while the victims were still conscious—to judge by the agony and terror in their staring eyes.

I had a strange impression of having read of just such slaughter and desolation when I was very young, some historic tale of similar happenings in Europe in the early days of civilisation. Here, amidst these gigantic piles of rock, the people were still in the beginnings of the feudal system. It was as if one were given, by some odd alchemic means, the power to turn back the pages of history and look upon life and death as it was several centuries ago.

A symbolisation of man's inhumanity to man. How far had we progressed since those days? Was there such a thing as progress? I had but to conjure

up pictures of the World War to realise that there was no such thing. Wholesale murder, barbarism, fiendish mutilation, the lust to kill—these had merely taken on new and more deadly forms. We were so ready to look upon these hill people as beings apart, crazy folk because they were always ready for any sort of killing—we, the representatives of a progressive civilisation that has death written across its painted face. . . .

Perhaps I was seeing too much of death just then. I can recall how I looked round on that habitation, which only a few hours before had been brimming with life, a-bustle with activity, now silent in death. The world's mad, I thought. We're all mad. There was the Khan of the village, strung up on his own door, and some fiend with a horribly grotesque sense of humour had arranged his wives about him in attitudes of reception . . . his children, the very young and the adolescent, irrespective of sex, mutilated beyond description.

In one corner of the courtyard the household goods had been piled into a great heap. The pile still smouldered. In the rooms of this miniature castle of the hills the story was the same—evidence everywhere of maniacs who had run amok, wanton destruction of life and property in every corner. And these violators had not even the excuse of drunkenness. Moslems abstain from strong drink. It is the law of the Koran. Their intoxication was that of blood-spilling. These total-abstainers could indulge in the worst possible form of intoxication—with the backing of the Koran: "Kill all those who

join other gods to God." And as these villagers had refused to join Lenhai in his holy war, the refusal was quite simply interpreted as joining other gods to God.

The shambles presented something of a problem to our commander. Naturally he was anxious to push on after the Mad Fakir. He and his men had left the village at dawn of that day. The old man who had put himself at the head of this handful of survivors and who declared he had been a headman himself in his younger days, known by the name of Ibrahim, was able to point out the direction the marauders had taken and volunteered the information that the Mad Fakir was making for the Nahakki Pass, further north. He asserted he had heard this while in hiding.

Nahakki Pass! I met the Colonel's eye. His look was significant. Was it in the historic Nahakki Pass of ill fame that Lenhai was gathering the clans for the descent upon India? This Pass is in the Upper Mohmand, high in the mountains of Asia, in a land of wild tribes and vast unexplored areas. The Upper Mohmands are notoriously the most troublesome of the hillmen outside the administered area of the Frontier. They were, however, supposed to be within the sphere of British influence and outside that of Afghanistan. It was these same Mohmands who led the Frontier blaze of 1897, and again in 1908, when the British outposts were surrounded and decimated. But, thanks to the work of such irregulars as our own, there had been no demonstration in that area by British troops for more than a quarter of a century.

And now—it would seem as if Lenhai were trying to emulate those earlier rebels. Strong proposed to trek towards the Nahakki Pass. Possibly the village in which I had been imprisoned lay somewhere along the route—though that was of no real consequence, since there was now a more definite objective in view.

By this time it was nearly high noon, and the sun was beating down on that village of the dead with such disastrous effect upon the massed corpses as to make the air suffocating. Occasional gusts of hot wind would pick up the dust and filth of the streets and take it swirling through the air, spreading a gritty mixture of a most unsavoury order.

That was the problem. What were we to do with this village and its rotting inhabitants? We could hardly leave it in the care of its fifteen survivors, seven of whom were women. By nightfall the place would be alive with jackals, pariah dogs, and vultures and eagles. The scavenger birds and the slinking beasts of prey would take possession and these fifteen survivors would not have a ghost of a chance against them. They would have to flee for their lives! Nor could we take the villagers with us.

The only solution was to leave a detachment of men in the village to help and direct the survivors in the disposal of their dead. If this were not done before nightfall the place would become uninhabitable—perhaps for months! It fell to my own platoon to shoulder the task. The ghastly work

was started without further delay. Even then, in broad daylight, it was necessary for the native N.C.O.s to accompany the working parties, revolver in hand, for the speedy despatch of the more persistent kites and dogs. As is well known, funerals in the East must always take place within a few hours of death. No corpse may be held until the next day, except in very special circumstances. Otherwise the rotting diseases of the East would spread greater devastation than they do already.

Barney Binns elected to stay behind with my platoon. We were two white men in charge of sixty native irregulars and four havildars, to say nothing of the fifteen villagers. We sat on the buttressed wall of that little fort we were to hold until it was cleaned up and stared down at the depleted company as it marched out. We neither of us said a word, but just stared in silence as the column crossed the plateau, turned into the valley beyond the ridge of rock and disappeared from view. There wasn't anything to say. The word of Colonel Strong was law, and that was all there was to it.

We had two days' rations. We were armed. We had plenty of ammunition—not that we were likely to need it. It hardly seemed possible that Lenhai would pass this way again, at least, not for some time. We were also armed with maps. We were to join the company at Halki Gandab, a town on the Gandab River some five hours' march ahead. The stream crossed our route for the Nahakki Pass.

This job of burial would not be completed much before nightfall. There could be no hope of our getting on the move before the morrow's dawn. Should the company make contact with Lenhai reaching Halki Gandab a despatch would be sent. . . .

Altogether a lively prospect! We were doomed to spend a night in this village of the dead. The survivors were digging. . . . The platoon was split up into working parties. They were labouring like coons. Their incentive was a burning desire to get out of this habitation of the dead and join the others in the fun of tackling Lenhai. Corpses were being swung into carts with less reverence than one would use in handling a dead dog. But the job was proceeding apace. By sunset I could fancy the air about the fort walls was considerably sweeter. The vultures were drifting away to other pastures. The dead had been buried in communal graves, and great stones were then being piled over them—not to mark the spot, but to prevent prowling jackals from scratching a way down into the newly-turned earth.

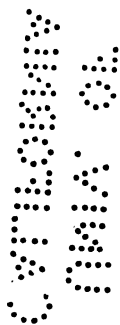
The job done, we assembled the men in the fort and turned out a double-armed guard. The guard remained a habit even in that dead village. Darkness had now descended and Binns and I decided that some sleep was indicated if we were to be on the march by dawn. We had already explored the fort and had rigged up something in the nature of beds. Eater-of-Women, now my personal servant, had orders to turn in at the doorway of our improvised bedchamber. I wanted the fellow under



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my wing. True, the only women within miles were these pitiful seven of the village, and though these survivors of the holocaust were no longer young, I knew this Eater-of-Women for an undiscriminating rascal; and we'd had trouble enough for one day.

I had hardly got to sleep, however, when I was awakened by a frantic tugging at my shoulder and a native voice calling:

"*Sahib! Sahib! Dekko, sahib!*"

I sat up with a jerk and looked. So did Binns. Eater-of-Women was standing in the doorway, torch in hand, with two of the women from the village. They were grinning and blinking in the light of the torch and I could hardly repress a shudder.

"What the devil——?"

"Ibrahim Khan, *sahib*, him send presents for helping bury his people. <sup>1</sup>*Pukkarao, sahib!* Ibrahim Khan say *ferungi* good. Givem wife!"

"Get to hell out of here and take those women with you!"

"But, *sahib!* Ibrahim Khan. . . . He give . . .!"

"*Jao! Jaldi! Jaldi!*"

"Wait a minute! You can't chuck these dames back at the old Khan like that, Digger! If the old guy sent them here—well, I guess he sent all he had to give. It must have cost that ancient a whole lot of pride to offer his women to us infidels. Forgetting your geography, aren't you, Digger?"

True, this was something much more than just looking a gift horse in the mouth. Morals are

<sup>1</sup>Take.

<sup>2</sup>Go! Quickly! Quickly!

largely a matter of geography—a fact which, in my excitement, I'd overlooked. These smiling, fidgeting women were the Khan's richest gifts. From the point of view of good manners a refusal would be exceedingly difficult. When a Moslem honours his guests with such a service it is a serious insult to refuse. On the other hand there are limits to good manners. I stared at Binns. He was thoroughly enjoying the situation. He was displaying his teeth in a wide tombstone grin.

"Well—what? How d'we step out of this?"

"You are asking me, Mr. Blankety Binns! I'm hanged if I know. Couldn't we say we're tired? We'd like to sleep awhile before . . . accepting this service?"

"Sure we could, Digger. And these dames we're offered would stick around all night. Why, I guess we're insulting 'em by even hesitating!"

I don't know how we should have got out of that delicate situation—if it had not been for the sudden uproar which, at that anxious moment, broke out in the courtyard. The startled cries of our men and the sounds of warning shots fired by our guards sent us scampering out of the building like frightened hares. We arrived on the scene to find the guards rousing the platoon. There was wild confusion about the walls of the little fort. The women's screams of panic tore the air. They were running about and appealing to the sepoys to protect them against Lenhai!

Lenhai returned? It seemed incredible. Binns and I rushed to the walls. The night was suddenly

filled with the shattering roar of musketry. We saw through the gloom that a veritable army of creeping figures were assembling in the village below us, moving and manœuvring around under cover of the ruined buildings. What else could this be but the army of the crazy Lenhai? There was no time then to wonder why he and his men had returned.

We set to work to distribute our band of sixty men about the loopholes and embrasures of the fort walls. The machine-gun crew assembled the gun. Lenhai had been unable to destroy this fort on his previous visit. We would see to it that he should not enter now he had returned, much less destroy. And now the rebels were sending up a hail of lead all around us. We were, however, adequately protected by the stout walls. It was for just this sort of defence that they had been built.

"Come on, you crazy loons!" laughed Binns.

Truly this was just what the boys were spoiling for! spurts of flame lit up the broken buildings about the village. This was all the sighting we required for our automatic gun. We could only guess then at the number of Lenhai's men. It looked as if the whole village was alive with creeping figures. It is no exaggeration to say that the boys were chuckling over this promise of a scrap. The hullabaloo they kicked up must have been something of a shock to the Mad Fakir, since they sounded more like six hundred than sixty men!

I sat behind the stuttering gun while Eater-of-Women fed the belts of bullets through the breech,

swinging the snout at each spurt of fire, each vague, shadowy figure down there, pouring leaden death out of the chattering barrel at the rate of seventy to the minute, with only a second's pause when we reached the end of a belt of ammunition. Bullets whined through the air like whip thongs. We were yelling (with glee!) at the rebels, and the rebels were bawling (with religious oaths and blasphemous snarls!) at the little band defending this ancient castle of a Khan who was no more, and the uproar was deafening.

I was conscious of those two women near me. Still at our service—not the doubtfully pleasant one they had anticipated. They were in fact bringing up ammunition. The action was in full order. We were giving a terrific account of ourselves, evidence of which we had in plenty, for those advancing figures down below had been very effectively checked!

There must have been three or four hundred in Lenhai's force, judging from the way they had disposed themselves about the rubble and wreckage of the village. They seemed to fit every cranny and alley, sheltering behind broken walls and heaps of debris. They had thought peradventure, to take us by storm, as they had taken the whole village on the preceding night. But now they were up against a vastly different proposition—up against a small detachment of Hell's Broth Militia that an hour or two ago had been cursing a gruesome fatigue which was keeping them from the fun of making contact with one Lenhai!

No odds seemed too great for us then. Were we not securely entrenched behind stout buttressed walls, with nothing stronger than rifle fire to wreck our defence? I could well appreciate the feelings of these levies of ours. I was never so happy in a scrap as then. I, too, chuckled while I shoved my thumbs at the firing buttons and swung that deadly gun at the groping figures below. We could hardly know just how many we were accounting for, since the only way of determining was by the "dead spots"—the positions that began by being troublesome and then ceased to show any sign of movement or life.

<sup>1</sup>"*Kuch dar nahin hai!*" chuckled these strange women at my back.

There was no fear! Of course there was no fear. We felt ourselves monarchs of this situation! Somehow, in those weird surroundings, in the light of that fitful moon, in that din of carnage, I felt at home with these strange women! Maybe it was that indefinable something in their attitude towards one. A queer experience and one not easily forgotten. A man, if he is a man, cannot but feel some sort of compassion for the woman who would offer all she can. . . . And the sympathetic friendliness of these two during that memorable night was a thing not to be denied.

The firing went on steadily, hour after hour, throughout the night. Once the rebels made a wild charge, firing from snap as they careered crazily over the jagged walls and piles of wreckage, rancously calling their battle cry as they came—

<sup>1</sup>"There is no fear."

"Take a taste of Hell!" But it was they who took the taste when they met our withering fire. We could see as they drew nearer the fort its shattering effect upon them. Men threw up their arms and slithered into the dirt. Others came up in desperate rushes, stumbling headlong over the crumpled-up dead and wounded.

For a long time afterwards we referred to that tight little corner of the hills as the Village of Ibrahim. But to me it will always remain the Village of Death. No sooner had we emptied the streets of one layer of dead than we were engaged laying down another! The spot was fated to be a cemetery of violent death. Some of the tribesmen raced up to within seventy or eighty yards of the fort walls—before they were knocked over and dropped into the dust. No other force on earth would have charged into such a shrivelling hail of lead—save a Moslem one, for to these fanatics this was the ideal death, to drop whilst fighting the unbelievers, and thus assure themselves of admission into the Moham-medan paradise.

Dawn came up suddenly, like a flash of sheet lightning filling the heavens with a splash of vivid colours. It illuminated a dreadful scene. The streets below us were littered with twisted bodies. The dirty tortuous alleyways that we had cleared of dead were in a worse state than ever. The new day brought the brown-grey kites wheeling and shrieking high over our heads. The scent of death had reached their nests in the mountain peaks. They were come to the feast.

Lenhai and his rebels had now snuggled in behind the ruined structures. Daylight had given them furiously to think. Maybe the Mad Fakir realised that if he made any more rushes in the light of day his holy crusade would end too abruptly. Far too many of the clans had gone to Allah already. A strange silence came over the village. It was such a contrast to the night of clamour and racket that it shocked the senses. At all events, we now had time to look over our own force and estimate the cost of the hectic dark hours.

"Well, I guess that gives us a break, Digger. Now we can tot up the cost and decide what to do for shot."

"Are we as low as all that?"

"We shot off a few thousand rounds last night, buddy."

And then, I remember, we stared at each other with a very knowing sort of look. We had been keeping these rebels at bay only by expending a vast amount of ammunition. But that was all we had done—kept them at bay. They were still there. They were likely to stay. For us, imprisoned in that fort, the situation had taken on a very sinister hue. Our shot and our rations were limited! Why hadn't we sent a despatch to the column during the night? It would have been simple enough to catch up with it then, and advise the commander of our predicament. . . .

"Heavens! Aren't we a couple of fools?"

"Wish you hadn't asked me that," grinned the American.



This fellow, I thought, could be facetious in any circumstances.

"Because, you see, Digger, the query applies to only one of us."

"Good Lord! You saw to that?"

"Yeah. While you were wearing your thumbs out on that chattering rod, and I must say, you certainly were enjoying yourself!—I sent off a couple of the boys under cover of the darkness and the fire. Yes, sir! And they took our good Kabuli ponies!"

I heaved a sigh of relief. If those two sepoys got through, and I knew of no reason why they should not, the Mad Fakir down there would have little chance of starving us into surrender. Indeed, he might find himself beautifully trapped. Though, on reflection, I doubted whether we could trap him as easily as all that. He seemed to have something of an espionage system—otherwise how did he come to learn that one platoon of Hell's Broth Militia had been left behind in this village? He must have learned of our presence here or he would never have turned back on us. It was surely a deliberate and calculating manœuvre, for he had clearly avoided our column while retracing his steps.

There was method in this Fakir's madness. We had to hand it to him for this unique bit of strategy. The brilliance of his move slowly dawned upon us. Apparently he planned to dispose of our company in bits. Very neat. Our platoon was to be the first piece, after which he would proceed to nibble at the heels of the column—a very distinct advantage

for him since Colonel Strong would be searching for him somewhere ahead of our column and not at the tail!

Yes, it was a very knowing look that passed between friend Binns and myself. Battles are never won by belittling the enemy. I even began to doubt whether these eight men and seven women of the village who had greeted the arrival of our company were all that they appeared to be! I said as much. Binns thought my notion was unbalanced.

"They're in with us, aren't they?" he snapped. "Why, the women were carting ammunition around for us last night!"

"What does that prove? Where are these villagers, anyway?"

We lined up the platoon. The night's work had left us with five men more or less seriously wounded—which was pretty good considering what we had gone through in the long dark hours. We rounded up the seven women, too—but there was no sign anywhere in the fort of that pitiful-looking wretch, Ibrahim, or his male compatriots. They had completely disappeared!

I yelled to the havildar: "Arrest those damned women and tie them up!"

"I guess you are right, Digger. We *are* a couple of saps! Ibrahim! The poor ancient patriarch of the ruined village!"

I fancy we looked hard at each other then.

"Migosh! If we'd only fallen for the two dames he'd sent us . . . Lenhai would have been right inside the fort before we could kiss and say good-bye!

Omigosh! Where these crafty devils are concerned we are just two little innocent boys!"

"What I can't understand is why Ibrahim and his pals didn't take these women with 'em when they scuttled during the night."

"Simple. These dames have been left holding the bag—damn their red breeches!—because they were never in on the scheme to trap us. These hillmen don't take women into their war councils, I guess. Besides, would they have acted so well if they'd been in on it—labouring like coons to keep us fed with ammunition, helping all they knew to stop that mob from breaking into the fort? They couldn't have hidden their feelings to that extent! These dames know nothing about it. They've just been used by Lenhai and his pal Ibrahim—I'd stake my oath on that."

"Then Lenhai and his mob were not very far away when we arrived at the village yesterday morning?"

"Too true."

"Heavens! This thing gets more berserk every minute!"

"Think so? It's simpler than that, Digger. Look—the Fakir brings his army to this village. He kills all who resist him, and takes the remainder in his army, including a few dumb janes as camp followers. He has his ventilators on the wind north, east, south and west—and so learns of our approach. That crazy nut of his concocts the scheme of leaving a handful of men and women behind, as survivors, to put the terrible tale of

the raid; and, migosh, there was enough evidence in this burg of rotting dead to lend colour and truth to their tale. Appearances were all in favour of our being taken in. While we were being played for suckers, the Fakir retires to the hills with his army and waits for his chance to double back on his tracks."

"Taken in is good! Strong himself was taken in! The whole bally shoot of us were taken in—if that's any satisfaction!"

"Yeah. And we were saps enough to clean up the village after Lenhai's mob had done their dirty work. Migosh! Can you beat that?"

## CHAPTER V

### OUT OF THE FRYING PAN——

OUR situation in that tight little fort with the rebels surrounding us, lying hidden among the ruins of the village, was serious enough in all conscience. But for the forethought of Barney Binns in sending off the two men to contact with Colonel Strong and acquaint him with our position, I doubt whether we should have got out of the place alive.

We lined up the men and impressed upon them the necessity for reserving our resources. We had rations for the day. We might be relieved during the day. But in this uncertain world of High Asia. . . . The ammunition was an even greater problem. We should need to husband the remaining few rounds with the greatest care.

And then something happened which brought us very near to disaster. Water! Even as we talked to the men one of the guards who had been told off to watch our seven women prisoners came running up in a very excited manner. He reported that three of the women were sick, terribly sick. . . . We sent the men back to the posts about the walls and hurried inside to see what had happened.

Three of the women were rolling about the floor, obviously suffering intense pain, for the brown faces

had turned a dirty grey. It took some time to get the facts from the other four. They were wailing and moaning and wringing their hands like mourners at a banshee. Death was in the air of this room and they knew it. When they saw our helplessness their wailings rose to shrieking curses. Their companions were dying and it was all our fault. They would all die. We should all die. They screamed and gesticulated at the row of chatties, big porous water vessels, that stood in the forecourt. The water was poisoned! They had all drunk of that water! Even as they shrieked at us they went down, one by one, great paws clasped about fat tummies, their eyes staring and mouths foaming.

It was a most appalling situation for any white man to face—those big ageing women in their ludicrous scarlet pantaloons and tight jackets throwing themselves about the floor in abdominal agony! We struggled with them, improvised emetics from salt and plaster from the walls. But it was no use. We were too late. Hell's Broth Militia doesn't carry stomach pumps around. One after another those women died on our hands. Their piteous struggling and ravings ended in the death throes—a perfectly ghastly spectacle. One felt suddenly sick. . . .

I ran out and across the corridor to the forecourt, smashed at those clay chatties until they lay in bits, and the precious water was flooding around my feet. Lenhai's plans were indeed well laid. That poisoned water was intended for our detachment—as well as those miserable women. Fortunately the boys still

had a supply of water in their bottles and in the canvas bags they carried, though this was getting perilously low! In another hour or two they would have been crowding round these vessels to replenish!

Barney Binns came out, mopping his face, and stared at that wicked waste of water.

"Well, I guess this guy Lenhai is what you'd call thorough, huh?"

"Heavens! I should say so! What's a few women to him?"

"I've seen a few around the Orient, but he's the craftiest wallah I've ever struck. And now he has us just where he wants us. He didn't succeed in shooting us to hell last night, and his poisoned-water scheme misfired this morning. We've got enough chow to last the day, and hardly enough water. If he makes a strenuous attack we'll use up our shot in keeping him back. So what?"

"Oh, don't start being pessimistic, for heaven's sake! Strong will be along with the column some time during the day. It's hardly begun yet."

"We don't know that those two boys reached him. We don't know whether they'll ever reach him. I'm not being pessimistic, Digger. I guess I'm just looking facts in the face. We're only beginning to learn things about Lenhai. There ain't much gets past him. He knew all about our movements. He trapped us, didn't he? It's reasonable to wonder whether those two sepoys got away. If they didn't—if they fell into the hands of this blighter Lenhai—well, we have the satisfaction of knowing that the chief is marching the column farther and farther

away from us every minute. It was that devil Ibrahim who said that Lenhai had gone off in the direction of the Nahakki Pass. . . .”

“I see. We have by no means got the measure of this Mad Fakir.”

“You said it. His craftiness is immeasurable. God knows what he’ll do next.”

We had then to decide what to do with the seven dead women. There was no place in this edifice of solid stone where we could bury them. Yet the bodies must be removed. They would become a source of intense discomfort, not to say danger, when the sun warmed up. In the end there was nothing for it but to throw them over the fort wall and watch them roll down the slope to the village below, there to join other corpses lying around this bright and sunny morning. The mob down there must have had a shock when they saw the women tumbling down towards them. Certainly it was the most horrible funeral in which I had ever participated.

There was, however, no movement down in the village—save those made by the dogs and scavenger birds. It would have been interesting to know Lenhai’s reaction to the sight of seven dead women bumping along towards him. His poisoned water had failed, his attacks had failed—he could hardly guess at the state of our rations, ammunition and water—what then would be his next little trick? The sun was rising towards its zenith and he had not made a move of any sort. Starving us into surrender, maybe?



The village of the dead was strangely quiet. No sound came up to us except the occasional cry of a wheeling bird, the sharp snarl of a ferocious dog. Not a single shot had disturbed the peace of the morning and it was drawing close to high noon. The sun was almost overhead. It blazed down upon us with relentless force. Faint breezes wafted up towards us the awful stench of those things down below. Binns and I lay in the embrasures of the wall and watched the village through our glasses. Nothing stirred except the heat haze.

The problem of water occupied us both as the day grew hotter and hotter. Some five or six hundred yards down the slope there stood one of the village wells. None of Lenhai's men had approached it—though it was hardly likely he would have poisoned that. Poisoning wells in any circumstances was something that the true Moslem abhorred. Just the same, it was out of reach. We could not hope to procure any water at that well during daylight. God in heaven! What had happened to those two boys of ours?

I gathered in the canvas water bags. They were mostly half-empty. We hung them in the shade and placed a guard over them. I think I realised then that we were beginning something in the nature of a siege, though I would not admit it even to myself. I still tried to believe that we should sight the column hurrying to relieve us before nightfall.

But the day wore on and there was no sign of any such relief. The boys became restless. They

wanted to use their guns, get into action, any sort of action rather than lurk behind those walls, dozing on their feet. They hated inactivity, those rapscallions of Hell's Broth Militia. The senior havildar, their spokesman, came to me, suggested we should leave the fort and make a dash for it. The boys were ready to fight their way through Lenhai's force and out through the village gates.

That would be sheer suicide. The odds against us must have been at least ten to one. We should be annihilated. If the worst came to the worst. . . . Compared to dying of thirst, that would be a glorious way out. When the sun began to dip towards the horizon we knew that something must have happened to those two sepoys. Not necessarily that they had been caught by the Mad Fakir's men. It might be that they had met some other raiding band during their pursuit of the column. One tried to think that. In such an event, one or both would make a getaway, maybe.

The hot hours dragged by on leaden feet and we had nothing to do but think and think and think, and stare down upon that charred heap of broken buildings. There could be no possible doubt about it now. Lenhai knew that our column was striding away towards the Nahakki Pass, knew they were well out of reach, otherwise he would not have remained quiet for a whole day. He knew our native soldiery sufficiently to appreciate that such a manœuvre would have a most demoralising effect upon them. He knew we had no water except that which we had carried into the fort last night.

Why, then, should he trouble about making an attack in the light of day? He need only sit tight—wait! A natural thirst would do the rest.

“He’s planning an attack for to-night, Digger. Guess we gotta ration our shot.”

“Looks like it. Better impress on the boys that they fire only on command. My boy and I will look after the machine gun. I fancy we can keep that going for a while. But we’ve nothing to waste. I’m leaving you to keep a tight hold on the boys. Those rebels must be allowed to come right up to within a few yards of the walls before we open out.”

“I get you. Draw ’em in and then volley to command.”

Despite our strict rationing, there was very little water left by the time darkness had descended. Night fell over that silent village like a dropped curtain, almost blotting it out. If we were to replenish our water bags now was the time. Lenhai was smart enough to set a sniping party on that well, but in this dense blackness there was just a chance the water carriers would make it and get back. We had to try, otherwise we faced another and worse day. There was no lack of volunteers. This was something the boys enjoyed—the stealthy, silent creep under cover of darkness, the sporting chance at the well, and any other hazard they could run into.

We had the dickens of a job keeping the whole detachment back. They all clamoured. Three men were chosen. Silently they slipped over the wall and dropped to the ground with their canvas buckets

and bags. We watched them open out, separate, glide softly into the gloom, vague sinister shapes that seemed to merge into the blackness. Then a long silence while some fifty or so men in that little fort stared from their loopholes into the night and waited for the return of the creeping trio. I gazed into that impenetrable blackness until all manner of fantastic shapes danced before my eyes.

Then was added another terror. The terror of sleepiness. There had been no sleep to speak of during the previous night, and that after a strenuous day. This ghastly waiting. Action, action of any kind would have roused us into wakefulness. I know I jumped with a start when I felt the hand of Binns on my shoulder—to hear his wisecrack about soldiers who sleep at their post.

We had to face the fact that our three boys had been gone an hour and there had been never a sound from them, nor from that mob below. It was uncanny. Quite frankly, it was beginning to get on my nerves—this awful silence, this fog of night, this eternal waiting for something to happen. Lenhai was playing his game well, subtly, as became his true character of Mad Fakir.

“Knifed!” whispered Binns.

That was how it looked to me. Knifed! The trio had probably been permitted to reach the well, had drawn the water, and as they turned to mount the slope again—the swift silent thrust. We were beginning to appreciate our Mad Fakir. All sorts of crazy thoughts raced across the mind then. I felt I should go berserk if I did not do something soon. This was

definitely my pigeon. Fifty men were waiting on my decision. The havildar explained that three volunteers had been chosen by the boys. They had a plan. It was to take a leaf out of Lenhai's book. They would approach the well in a wide circle, attend to the watchers down there before attempting to get the water.

I nodded. They went. They went with grinning faces and an anticipatory light in their dark eyes. Once more the nerve-wracking wait. Nothing happened. Nothing stirred down there. Another hour passed—and another. Gehenna could not be worse than this, I thought. Would this wretched night never end! I began to pray for dawn. We could sleep then, forget our thirst, our nerves, in blessed slumber, while a skeleton guard kept watch.

Again I was seeing things in the darkness, indistinct shapes creeping upwards. It could not be fancy now. There they were—one, two, three, four. . . . These were not our returning waterbearers. Was I really going mad? There seemed to be dozens of them . . . creeping, creeping. Nay, hundreds! The slope was alive with crawling figures. I tore my eyes away, afraid that I was just seeing things, that this was but the chimera of an exhausted body and a tired mind. But I noted as I turned to glance round the walls the sudden but silent movement among the men. They too had seen. This was no hallucination of the mind. Lenhai's men were coming at last. Oh, thank the fates!

Binns crept over to where I sat crouched behind the machine gun.

"Oh, boy!" he whispered throatily. "They're coming. We give 'em the first volley on the sound of your gun. Good! Let 'em creep right up and under. As soon as you see the white of their eyes. . . . That's your meat!"

He crept away again.

How silently those devils advanced. My only worry then was that our boys would get impatient and start firing before the rebels had been sufficiently drawn. I wanted them right under the walls—and as thick as they liked to come! So I watched and waited while they crept nearer—nearer. Eater-of-Women was on his haunches beside me and I could feel the excitement vibrating from him. His eyes were staring into mine. He would not speak, but I knew from the look in that tell-tale gleam that he was begging me to let go. That same gnawing impatience was worrying his fifty or so compatriots around these walls . . . .

On the instant that the crawling figures rose upright to charge across the last few intervening yards, my thumbs automatically pressed the firing buttons. The stillness of the night was suddenly rent by the shattering rat-tat-tat of the gun, by the immediate crash of the rifle volley. Thereafter a regular snap and crackle of fire, while the automatic gun chattered its leaden way into the hides of the advancing rebels. I saw them toppling over by the score, crumpling into the dirt and performing a grotesque roly-poly down the slope into the gloom. We had got them just so—waist-high!

In those first few minutes we inflicted terrible

slaughter. The night was alive with the crack of volleys, the hoarse cries of excited men, the yelps and curses when a spot of lead found a home. Even so, some of the rebels had crept so near to us as to be able to make flying leaps at the wall. A score or so reached the crest of the battlements. For several frantic moments it was touch-and-go on that section of the wall. There was a hand-to-hand scuffle. The invaders were clubbed, knocked down like aunt sallies from the uncertain foothold. Others leapt to take their places. I swung the gun, raked the thick body of them, cleared the wall. Still the massed crawling thing crept up behind. There was no doubt about their determination to take us in one fell swoop. It was the craziest rush imaginable. Men literally fell upon our spurting lead. They came up in bunches.

It looked at one moment as if we should be unable to check that blind charge of firing, leather-lunged maniacs. They seemed to crash out of the blackness below into our line of fire in unceasing streams. There were no timed volleys from us now. The boys were pressing the clips and potting with astonishing rapidity, and even in those frenzied minutes I could think with a sickening sense of futility of our rapidly diminishing rounds of ammunition, and pray we should not exhaust it before we had sent these raving devils pell-mell down the hill again.

I could have no notion as to how many belts had snaked through this jabbering gun. This Eater-of-Women was become an expert at feeding the

belts, but even he was not fast enough for my cold rage against the dark masses that loomed up before me. I only knew that the strips of cartridges kept coming up. I dared not think of the last one . . . a cold empty gun.

Then we heard the voice of Lenhai himself. We knew that powerful voice, Binns and I, for it had been impressed deeply upon us during a melodramatic evening not very long ago. If only one could see him! He was too wise to show himself. His mighty voice rose above the shatter and tumult of battle. He was calling a retreat. His men began to drop back into the inky depths below us. They were dropping on all-fours, scared, no doubt, lest they should stop a bullet in the back—and what disgrace could be greater than that.

I signalled the cease fire. We let them go. The first faint pencilling of dawn marked their going. Lenhai was not to be trapped beneath our walls by the birth of a new day! I am not likely to forget that dawn. Brilliant dawns, as well as colourful sunsets, are common enough in the Orient, as everyone knows. Perhaps it was the striking contrast to the jet of the night which impressed it so vividly upon my memory. It was not merely startling. It was awe-inspiring in its amazing variety of colours.

I lay with my back against the wall, mopping the sweat, and staring at the swiftly-changing kaleidoscope that was the sky. I was gaping like a coon at this magic of the heavens when I heard a shout. Binns leapt to his feet and looked over the wall. I joined him. I wished that I could have



stayed with the other view and ignored this one down the slope.

The hillside was strewn with dead and those not yet dead—a monstrous assembly of bodies twisted up into every conceivable shape—one, within a few yards of the wall, so contorted in the death throes that the head had arched almost to the heels, just one sickening sight after another, a grotesque pile of dead, some face downwards, as if indeed they had bitten the dust in their last agonising moments.

But it was not this collection that had caused the man to shout. It was another group further down the hill—six stiffened figures hung around the well, swaying gently in the breeze, the bodies of sepoy who had tried to bring water to us during the night. Three of them had set off with grinning faces, full of assurances that they were able to outwit the Mad Fakir's men.

Now we knew there was no water for us down there. We knew, too, that the two who had gone off with the despatch to catch up Colonel Strong must have met with ill-fortune in some way. The sun was creeping up. Thirst was tightening its grip. There was not a drop of water between us. We were facing a day of heaven knew what. We had a miserable handful of shot.

We told off the guard and turned in for some sleep. It was noon when I awoke. I hoped the others would sleep on—for there is no thirst like that of a thirsty man who awakens to find he must still endure it. I crawled out to the parapet. The guards were crouched about the loopholes, mostly

dozing. The sun blazed down. The air was deathly still. The stench of the village rose. I went to the wall and looked down. The dogs and the birds were busy on the hill. Let the guards sleep. I couldn't raise voice enough to rouse them, anyway. My mouth was dry as parchment, tongue thick and leathery, lips cracking. I searched hopelessly for moisture, tore the chin-strap from my topee and tried to chew on that. As long as these fellows slept, I thought, we should avoid any false move. God knows what crazy thing they would do when they awoke to this raging, gnawing thirst.

I crept about the castle, around the parapet, the forecourt, every room, and on to the flat roof. If that poisoned water had been there I must surely have taken a swig at it. I gazed round the barren country with the aid of glasses. There was nothing. The whole world seemed dead—except those voracious beasts and birds down there. It was the end, I told myself. We could not hope to get out of this. I did not despair easily, having been in one or two tight corners. But thirst under a burning sun is something quite apart from every other sort of endurance.

When I returned to the parapet the men were rousing themselves, tipping up empty water bottle, chewing on the stoppers, gnawing at twigs—anything to ease the pain of a maddening thirst. There was trouble immediately I showed myself. They were clamouring to be allowed to go down to the well. I knew they would be shot to pieces before they had reached half-way. But I was sick and weary and mad with thirst.

"Let 'em go!" snapped Binns.

I selected two men. We would cover them with the machine gun until they reached the water. They went over the wall—we dared not remove the barricades from behind the gates. We watched them crawling down the slope on their bellies, dragging the canvas bags, inching their way from the cover of one dead body to another, slashing at the yapping dogs, disturbing the kites at their gruesome feast. They were within fifty yards of the well when I saw a figure rise up to take aim at them. Instantaneously my thumbs pressed the buttons. The figure slumped. The boys went forward again. A creeping figure showed an inconsiderable inch or so. Again the gun rapped its message. Another rebel was flat. The boys made a crouching staggering sort of run, but dropped again on the sound of the gun. Now it was a matter of half-a-dozen yards. And there were waiting snipers hiding just beyond that well—behind the walls of a ruined house not more than a hundred yards away from the precious water. The sun glinted on rifle-barrels and I opened the chattering jaws of the gun again. I kept her going while the boys crawled the last few yards, kept it up while they dipped for water, while fifty watching men strained their eyes and licked at the salt sweat. I had only one terror then—that the ammunition would give out before they could crawl back up the hill.

I still had my thumbs on the buttons. One of our boys screamed—screamed at the sight of those two down there quenching their own thirst before they turned about to make the journey back with

the bulging water bags. Shots were flying all around them then. Each of them picked up a body and used it for cover. So they crawled upwards—the bags underneath them, the bodies on top, a veritable hail of lead spitting up the dust all around them. Eater-of-Women slipped in another belt—then croaked out the message I dreaded:

*"Bus, sahib."*<sup>1</sup>

The last belt of cartridges! I went cold. A minute or so later and the gun was cold. I yelled to the men to use their rifles. Not more than a dozen or so were able to respond. The remainder, then, were without ammunition? The water-bearers were still only half-way up the slope, making progress by inches, while the lead spattered around them.

What was the use, anyway? When night fell the rebels would simply walk in, and that would be the end of one platoon of the famous Hell's Broth Militia.

It was impossible to tell whether either of those boys had been hit. They kept on climbing upwards, bringing their bodies and their bags with them. I prayed then, prayed as never before or since, that those bags of water should reach us. In their eagerness the men were scrambling on the walls. The havildars joined Binns and me in clubbing them back again.

The water bearers reached the wall at long last. We yelled with excitement. Both were wounded and one of them was unable to make the wall. A havildar slipped over and succeeded in getting him over the masonry and on to the parapet. He died

<sup>1</sup> "Finish."

a few minutes later. Heaven alone knows how he had struggled up that slope. He died with a grin on his pale brown face, for his thirst was quenched and he was happy.

We rationed the water. It was enough to give each man a good-sized drink. I sipped at mine, delicately, as if it were iced champagne instead of tepid dirty water. Never was liquid so sweet! Moreover, the heat of the day was diminishing, and after that drink we became sane again—and hopeful. With thirst appeased the outlook was infinitely brighter. We had a handful of cartridges between us. In an hour darkness would descend and the rebels would be here.

We must plan. The next move was ours. There was no point in waiting for Lenhai to come up. Binns, the havildars and I discussed the situation from every possible angle. We could arrive at no conclusion save that of dashing down the hillside and fighting our way out. It was mad enough, and it was extremely doubtful whether we should get through. But even if we stood our ground the result would be the same. At least we had a fighting chance if, and when we charged into the mob——

Suddenly there beat into our strained senses the whir and throb of an airplane. We stared at the sky. The thing was coming towards the village! There could be no doubt about it. Unmistakably a 'plane! And it was making for us at a terrific speed. We had not looked for succour in this direction. It was surely coming to our rescue? Or was this just some traveller of the skies passing over?

The men started to wave and shout. They were dancing with excitement. It was the most extraordinary and unexpected phenomenon. Not once in a blue moon did a 'plane pass this way. If a 'plane, why not Colonel Strong and his column? A thousand queries raced through my mind as I stared at the glistening dome of the sky and the black speck that grew gradually larger.

"It may be some aviator passing this way, and not a rescue at all."

"That's occurred to me, Digger. Come on! Let's get on the roof and signal. If he's just passing—well, maybe we can get a message to him."

The 'plane loomed over, dropping speed. It swooped close to the flat roof from which we signalled frantically, circled the village, came back, swooped again. We saw something dropped from the machine. The next instant there was a blasting explosion! Instinctively we all dropped flat. A few seconds and a blob of smoke rose from the slope below.

"Migosh! That was a bomb, fellah! A bomb!"

I was too astonished to do anything for several frenzied seconds. Then I yelled to the men to take cover. That bomb was intended for us. It was a bad shot. But even so, it was too close to us and too far away from the rebels in the village to leave us in any sort of doubt. The machine was coming back! We dived for cover. There followed another explosion. It was louder and nearer. There could be no question now of that aviator's intentions. He was here to bomb us out of this fort. He was on the side of these crazy crusaders! His second shot

had crashed on to the wall, sending the splinters of stone flying in all directions.

"But . . . it's incredible!" I gasped. "These tribesmen know nothing of 'planes!"

"I should say not. This guy is one of those crazy freelance flyers and he's working for Lenhai. The Fakir is in the money, I guess. He's able to employ bombers. Doesn't mind adopting the machines of the infidel—even if they *can* peek over the gardens of the *harim* at unveiled wives. What other explanation is there? This fellow is doing his darndest to shoot us to hell. He's coming again! Look out!"

There followed another resounding crash. The bombs had dug a hole in the parapet, sending rubble and stones skywards in a cloud of dust. There was a big gap in the wall by the gate. The rebels could now walk in any time they pleased. Apparently the massive gates in the wall surrounding the fort were our visiting aviator's objective. He had had his instructions from Lenhai before he came along.

"There seems to be some connection here . . . between that aviator we rescued and this 'plane."

"I guess so, Digger. We never found any sign of a 'plane. Pity the poor devil went west before he could tell us what had happened. When that guy swoops again I'm going to take a pot at him."

"You ass, Binns! He has a far better chance of getting you!"

Binns took no notice of my protest. He crawled towards the archway of the forecourt, cocked his rifle skywards, and waited. He crouched in the shadow of the stone archway. The zooming 'plane

approached, swooped again. There was another deafening crash. Barney Binns dropped like a bullet and the rifle fell with a clatter. I ran forward and dragged him under cover. He was covered in dirt from head to foot, momentarily blinded, and blood was running down his head.

"Just a chance in a million I might have hit his tank . . . instead of which I get a clout from a flying stone. Gosh! Was it a smack!"

"Are you all right?"

"Sure! But I'd give the soles of my feet for a drop of water to get this muck out of my eyes!"

"If that's all. . . ."

"Sorry, Digger."

With the sinking of the sun our unpleasant visitor disappeared. He had done his job, anyway. We emerged on to the parapet and looked at the wreckage. The great timbered gates, heavily studded and iron-bound, lay in pieces, and part of the wall had gone down with them. Neat. Very. It would have taken him all day to blast his way through the great blocks of stone of which the castle was built. He had done the next best thing—opened the gate for Lenhai's force. Obviously that aviator had been around here before, for he certainly knew the geography of the place.

The men were lined up and ready. They knew exactly what to do. We waited for zero. It had never been more nerve-wracking than this in Flanders. There we at least had food and water—and plenty of ammunition. Now the ammunition would not go round. Otherwise we had stood the siege remarkably



well, for there were no seriously wounded among us. Every man was on his feet. We were still a good platoon! We had stared down upon the village long enough to have its every twist and turning mapped on our minds. We knew exactly where we should break through.

Another black night fell over these granite hills. We crept down the slope in extended lines, stumbling and cursing the bodies that impeded us, making a blind progress. I knew then, as soon as we dipped into the blackness, that we could never keep any sort of formation in this attempt to cross the village. Snarling dogs and jackals leapt amongst us. As yet the rebel tribesmen had made no advance. They knew they had but to come and take. It seemed they were in no hurry. We were at the foot of the hill, Binns and I leading the first line, before anything happened.

We had turned the tables on them. It was our turn to provide the element of surprise. They did not expect to see us emerge out of the blackness at that precise moment. We were on top of that ruined house where the guards and snipers had hidden before they became aware of our presence.

And then the circus! Lenhai's advance guards yelled to high heaven of our presence and we could not stop them. There was very little firing then—mainly knife work and clubbing with rifle-butt. We went into it with a will, determined to fight our way through. Personally I was ready to die on my feet, for I knew what would happen if I fell into the Mad Fakir's hands again. It was not surprising then that I should fight like one possessed.

The black night was all in our favour. Though the rebel tribesmen were gathering about us in great numbers it was impossible for them to use their rifles at such close quarters, nor was it easy to distinguish friend from foe. Men spat the curses of Allah, skulls were cracked, knives flashed. We found ourselves in the centre of a big struggling, swaying mass, inextricably mixed, the dimness creating an astonishing and bloody confusion.

Once a band of us broke through. It looked for some hectic minutes as if we might make the outer walls. We were checked again, surrounded by a raucously howling mob. We fought for our lives in the inky darkness. Once I stumbled and pitched headlong into the dirt. There were agonising moments when the world was just a mass of champing feet. But somehow I was up again, jabbing and thrusting, parrying knife and rifle-butt, dodging, side-stepping, clearing a space, running—but only to be brought up again.

What a slaughterhouse it was! The groans of the wounded and dying mingled with the yells of infuriated fighters. Men were trampled underfoot, shrieks and oaths rent the air. The border tribesmen were wallowing in a feast of blood. And I knew long before the end came that we should never break through. I was conscious as I struggled and fought that there were few of our men left in this wild scrimmage. I had long since lost sight of friend Binns.

I thought I saw my chance—and jumped for it.

I had leaped a broken wall, but only to find myself in the middle of another group of jostling, blood-thirsty maniacs. Mine came with a sickening crash. I went down, remembering no more of that black night of terror.

## CHAPTER VI

### WE TRICK MAHRILA

I OPENED my eyes to the light of another day, tried to rise, but soon discovered that I was bound hand and foot. At first I could not understand the swaying movement of my body. Then I realised I was on some sort of improvised stretcher slung between mules, that the mules were plodding along a gulley. This, however, was no rescue—for I was trussed up like a mummy; and as I listened to the voices around me I knew that I was a prisoner of the rebels. I closed my eyes again. No point in letting these devils know I was conscious of my surroundings. They would make the discovery soon enough—and yank me out of this hammock to hoof the rest of the journey.

For the next few hours I lay with half-closed eyelids, trying to figure out the route we were taking without arousing suspicion. But it was not possible to do so from my position. My head ached intolerably and there was a curious stiffness down the side of the jaw. That must be where I received the clout, I thought. Where was Barney Binns—and the platoon? How many killed? How many prisoners? Why had Lenhai troubled to move us from the village? Couldn't he have dealt with us there? What

was his motive in leaving that village? Afraid of discovery?

These and a thousand other queries worried me as we jogged along hour after hour, while the sun rose and burned more strongly. At all events, I was resting. I intended to do so until I could no longer hide the fact that I was awake. I should need all my strength for what was coming. Curiously, there was no thirst, no hunger. Only a sense of numbness, as if one lay drowsing on a gently billowing sea.

Once we stopped at a village. There was a clamour of voices, shouts, cries of recognition. A friendly halt apparently. They were giving each other the Peace of Allah. Then the hoarse chanting of prayers. Feeding time. It was high noon. The sun was burning my eyelids. Better burned than cut off, I thought. The tribesmen crowded about the stretcher. I gathered they were discussing my condition. A coarse thumb jabbed at one eyelid. I lay still, breathing heavily but steadily. Someone threw water in my face, but I kept the lids closed and faked an unconsciousness that I hoped was convincing. Apparently it was. The caravan started again. That dash of water was most refreshing. I think I must have slept then.

It was late afternoon when I chanced an eye. The sky was brassy and the sun was beginning to dip. I felt cool and refreshed. We were still jogging along. Grey crags towered on each side of us. There seemed to be something familiar about them. I was soon to know. We began to climb a rugged

path along the hillside. Then a wide plateau, the walls of a village, welcoming cries, a great bustle and activity. We passed through the gates into the village. Even before I was dragged from the stretcher I recognised the place, that fort, those unmistakable watch towers. I shuddered at the recollection of an ant hill. I had been a prisoner in this nest of the hills once before and had escaped. Would I be able to break away a second time?

The lashings were cut from my feet and I was jerked upright. No point in shamming any further. I opened my eyes, stared at a red beard, a pair of cruel eyes, piercing eyes, that uncanny concentration of callous brutality, the mark of the sadist run mad. Be-akle Lenhai. He continued to stare for a long minute. But I was not to be frightened by a mad-man's eyes. I did not blink. He grew tired. He spat an order. Two giants of men fell upon me and I was dragged through the village, through the streets and the noisy bazaar while the gatherings of pantalooned men and women jeered and spat upon me as I passed by—the poor fool of a *ferungi* who thought he could escape from this stronghold of the hills and get away with it.

Without any attempt at flattering myself, I realised then that Lenhai had promised these people that I should be returned to them—so that they might enjoy once more the spectacle of my tortures. Was that why the Mad Fakir had so cunningly schemed to get my platoon alone in that village of death? Wasn't it rather an elaborate sort of kidnapping? I did not know what to think. But I did know by

the gibing comments of the crowd that they had expected my return!

Nothing short of a miracle would get me out this time. And yet, I had learned from experience that the astonishing thing about miracles is that they sometimes happen! I was an optimistic soul in those days. The savour of life was ever strong and sweet to my taste. I stared back at the yapping crowd, the great hulking brutes of men in their baggy breeches, the women in their long tight jackets and loose scarlet pantaloons drawn tight round the ankle, spitting through their veils.

My perceptions were quickened then. I was looking about for one who did not wear the veil. Mahrila had power, enormous power with the Lord High Lenhai. I began to plan even as I was being dragged towards the jail house. I was conceited enough to believe that I could pull something off with Mahrila. I never was much of a hand with women. In times of great stress these things are surely a matter of instinct? I'd play a different game this time. If it were information she required, she should have it—in abundance! I'd been to Peshawar since I was last in her hands. That would be my backing for a concocted tale of military secrets. What a prize mug I was not to have thought of such a thing before! But then my position did not seem so perilous as on this second occasion.

I felt I could do something with Mahrila. She was not a Moslem. She did not really belong to this outfit. She was Russian, and maybe more European than that. Perhaps she was as European as I. Might

we not have much in common? I decided I'd go a very long way in my deceptive play with this Mahrila. How little I knew then of that mysterious woman!

Thus my thoughts as I was dragged through the streets. I had seen nothing of the platoon. I wondered greatly about Barney Binns. I was literally thrown along the courtyard of the prison. How well I remembered those walls! A door was thrust open and I was shoved into my old quarters! And there was Binns squatting on the *charpoy*, bless his Irish grin. He raised a paw in mock salute.

"Howdy, fellah!"

"Fine! You?"

"Okay, Digger. You gotta nasty-looking cut there."

"Yes. I met a hell of a wallop last night and went out for the count."

"I know. I saw ye. I had to stand around and watch the boys—what was left of them—slashed to ribbons. I'm telling you, Digger, it was the most sanguinary showdown I've ever witnessed. I hope the good Lord will save me from seeing anything like it again."

"What happened?"

"You were lucky. I guess you were dead to the world. In the final round-up I was grabbed by half-a-dozen of these wallahs and trussed pretty securely. Lenhai had flares lit in the middle of the village and then had the remainder of the platoon brought up—there weren't more than a score of the boys left by that time. You know what these rebels

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feel about natives who fight for the *ferungi*? Omigosh! It was awful. It's a wonder their tortured screams didn't waken you up. It was enough to rouse the dead. Those horrible cries are ringing in my ears now. I couldn't move a muscle. Lenhai had 'em stripped—every stitch. He attended to 'em himself. They were pegged to a wall. That madman used his knife like a butcher on a side of beef . . . limbs, organs. . . . God! There's nothing I'd like better than sticking knives into his carcase. . . .”

We gazed at each other for a space. The recital made my flesh creep. I thought of those boys, their loyalty to the British *raj*.

“Eater-of-Women!” I snapped.

“Don't know, Digger. Never saw him. Guess he was knocked out. The platoon is flat. . . .”

“So they saved us for the entertainment of the inhabitants of this stronghold?”

“Yeah. Looks that way to me.”

“This is the village where I was imprisoned before.”

“Hell!” croaked Binns. “Is it?”

“This is the same cell. That circular opening up there is the one through which I made my getaway.”

“That so? They'll see to it ye don't do that trick a second time. Gosh! Ants!”

“I'm trying to keep the picture of that ant hill out of my mind.”

“Will they work that stunt again, Digger?”

“God knows!”

The guards thrust open the door. We jumped to our feet. But they were only bringing us food—a pannikin of water and a dish of rice and goat's

meat. We fell to. We ate with a relish of the rice and the meat, cleared the platter, drained the last drop of water. Maybe we should be left alone for the night. They would be freshening us for the entertainment on the morrow. Much might happen before to-morrow's dawn. The food and the drink made new men of us. After the guards had cleared the dishes we went into a huddle of ways and means. We were two strong, healthy men, not without brains. Surely we could plan a way out of even this jam?

Night had descended. A shaft of light penetrated the cell from the aperture above. When we hoisted each other up there we saw that the prison yard was ablaze with torches and there were guards immediately beneath us. Lenhai was not taking any chances this time. But it was typical of him to put me back in the same cell in the hope that I would try the same break away as before. Doubtless the walls were crawling with hillmen armed to the teeth. No. That was not the way. We had to think up something entirely different. We neither of us admitted the utter hopelessness of our position. We had a whole night in which to scheme and plan. . . .

"Is it likely that the Mahrila woman will visit you again?"

"I was hoping so."

I saw, however, that the scheme I had in mind could not be put into operation now. I hadn't reckoned on Binns being in the cell. Not that I was afraid he would hear my false military information.

He would understand that. But two men and a woman make a far different proposition from that of a man and a woman left alone in a cell. Not to put too fine a point upon the matter, my pretty scheme had gone all awry the moment I entered the cell. My friend, however, had one of his own.

"You are a trifle smaller than I am, Digger. . . ."

"And a devil of a lot bigger than Mahrila!"

"We'll have to risk that. Perhaps you could let the pantaloons down a bit. Anyway, I guess there's no other way out. It seems to me these Pathan guards are watching our ventilation up there and not concentrating so much on the door. There's a chance we could get by."

"Supposing she doesn't come?"

"We'll give her another hour, I guess. After that we gotta think up something else."

But she did come. She brought a pleasant surprise. We saw at once that our scheme was going to be simpler than we had anticipated. I imagine we just gaped our surprise when she stepped into the cell and locked the door behind her. She was in flying kit, crash helmet and gloves all complete, as if she had just stepped from a 'plane!

"So you are the bomber of wrecked villages!" I gasped.

"Gosh! Can you beat that!"

"Yes," she smiled, "it was I who flew over your starving soldiery. Hell's Broth Militia! Bah! You will need to turn out something better than the Kurram Militia to fight Be-Akle Lenhai's army.

You don't seem to realise the extent of his organisation."

"You stole that 'plane, didn't you? It was being delivered to the Amir of Afghanistan by that aviator we rescued and who died in Peshawar? It appears pretty obvious, Mahrila. The poor devil had to come down. You took him captive?"

The girl smiled, shrugged her shoulders. With each query I had stepped nearer those smouldering eyes. Suddenly I reached out, one hand clasp ing her neck, the other over her mouth. She was surprisingly strong, this little spitfire. She bit and struggled like a wild cat. But we very soon had her gagged. We proceeded, with a minimum of noise, to divest her of the flying kit. Then Binns held her while I pulled the kit on over my own, jammed the crash helmet on my head as well as I could, for it was certainly a tight fit. Finally we used strips of her silken underclothes to tie her up, secured the key and advanced on the door.

We walked out boldly. I was holding Binns by the arm and playing the part of Mahrila, trying to look as if I were conducting this prisoner to some place for special attention. As I turned to lock the cell door I saw two of the guards standing beneath the window of the cell four or five yards away. I kept my face hidden from them. All flyers look alike from behind when dressed in flying kit. I noted out of the corner of my eye, while I fumbled with the lock, how the two guards had straightened to attention at the sight of Mahrila's flying kit. So far, so good!

But we were by no means out of the wood. Guards were patrolling the courtyard. They glanced in our direction as we moved briskly along in the shadow of the prison house, saw what they took to be Mahrila leading one of the *ferungi* by the arm. The device worked—so far. What happened when we came to the end of the prison house?

"I don't know what lies the other side," I whispered.

My companion bit off two words.

"Keep going!"

We reached the end of the prison wall, paused uncertainly for appreciable seconds. Across the yard was another block of buildings. There were no guards in our immediate vicinity—they were too busy watching the yard walls, the way to freedom and the way we could not take at the moment.

"Come on!" snapped Binns.

We stepped smartly across the yard towards the buildings. There was very little light here and the going was easy enough, for this was not the way prisoners would escape! A flight of stone steps faced us. We ran up and into the shadow of a portico. There we paused. The guards were still patrolling unconcernedly along the walls. No cause for alarm. Our ruse had succeeded—so far! Mahrila was safely trussed and locked up in our cell.

"Where do we go from here?"

"What's this building, Digger?"

"I fancy it's the fort. The watch towers are above this place."

"Okay. Take off that flying kit and bring it along

till we can find a place to dump it. We're going in. Maybe, we can get through the place and out on the other side. Come on! Let's go!"

We went. The massive portico of solid stone led us into a dark hallway with arched roof. We stepped quietly. We were in the very heart of this stronghold of a village. We came to a large room, a great vaulted chamber, pillared, tessellated with mosaic tiles, dimly lit, silent as the grave.

"Door over there!"

We tiptoed across, entered another dark passage, accepted its welcome gloom. A distant sound of voices came to us as we crept along. A gathering of people somewhere. Sounds of feasting, shouts, laughter. More and more corridors. Cold stone everywhere. We paused at the end of a corridor. Footsteps were coming towards us. Breathlessly, pressed against the wall, we waited. The footsteps drew nearer. On the instant that the man shot round the angle of the wall my companion leaped, his great paw with all the power of six feet of muscle and sinew behind it, struck once. The fellow was taken completely unawares, received the full force of the blow and slithered noiselessly to the floor.

"Can't leave him here. He'd be discovered—and so would we!"

I gazed down the dim passage. A recess of some sort there. We dragged the fellow along and into a sort of alcove. There was a settee, cushions, rugs, an octagonal table of carved sandal wood. We stowed the flying kit, laid the man out as if he were sleeping, covered him with rugs. Above the couch was a frame

of lattice work, probably a window of the *harim*. If we should be caught in *this* quarter we should be flayed alive!

We hurried on. It was a blind, bewildering progress we made, down one passage and up another, for these corridors ran like warrens about the place. We must have been running round them for the better part of half-an-hour when we suddenly sensed the familiarity of our surrounds. We were back in the passage where we had left the sleeping Pathan.

"What the hell are we doing—chasing around in circles!"

I jumped on to the end of the couch and reached up to the grating. Staring through the lattices it was difficult to see clearly at first, then I made out what appeared to be an outbuilding and the courtyard beyond.

"There's a drop of about twenty feet—not more. If we can get this grating opened it would be worth trying. It looks as if we have been chasing around the inner shell of the building."

"Come on. Let's try it."

We wrenched at the lattice. It had been built to open like a pair of French windows, though it had not been opened for donkey's years. We pulled and struggled and wrenched and at last there was a rasping crunch as the rusted lock gave way. We stepped out on to the ledge of stone about three feet wide and saw that if we traversed this for a dozen yards or so we should reach the roof of another building. We carefully closed the grating behind us to delay any pursuit, then ran along the ledge.

We came to a flat roof and realised we must crouch

low if we were not to be discovered. We peered over the coping on to the yard below. Apparently we were still within the walls of the fort. There were the watch towers rearing into the gloomy sky. We lay flat and listened to the sounds of running feet. Suddenly the yard below was alive with hastening men. They seemed to our excited senses to be racing about in all directions. They were bawling and shouting and we caught the ominous word *ferungi*! Our escape had been discovered!

"Well, I guess that's torn it!"

"Torn nothing. We've had a good start. They can't possibly know where we are!"

"Not till they find that wallah on the couch!"

We explored the roof-tops. In a few minutes the news of our escape would fly around the village like wildfire. If we cleared the fort we still had the village—though I knew from experience that the place was full of tortuous alleys favourable to escaping prisoners. Once clear of the fort and we would have more than a sporting chance for freedom. What fools they were to put us both in the same cell!

We came to the coping of another roof and looked cautiously over. At right angles was what we judged to be the back of the prison building. It looked quiet down there. There wasn't much of a drop, an expanse of about twenty yards across the courtyard and then the wall. Most of the patrols seemed to have rushed to the front of the prison. We could hear them calling to each other. We dropped into the yard, ran across, and sought for the steps that lead to the crest of the battlements.



A figure loomed up. We crashed at him together, went down in a scrimmage, his cry ending in a choking grunt. A second later and he would have had the crowd round us! We pounded him until he lay still, then grabbed his rifle, his knives and cartridge belts, and sprang for the wall. That wall was about ten feet thick. Before we had cleared it and dropped to the ground outside the fort our presence was discovered. There was a sudden rush of scampering feet. Shots flew all around us as we sprang clear and started to run towards the dark cluster of hovels that marked the village proper.

We dived into the first dirty alley we came to. A bunch of shouting men and screaming women met us! But we had the taste of freedom in our nostrils and nothing could stop our mad race. Binns swung the gun and I followed him, knife in hand. We cleaved a way through and raced on, the pack howling at our heels. We could have no idea of the direction we were taking, knew only that we must run as never before, outdistance this bunch of villagers.

We came to a bend in the lane, swung round the corner. I felt a tug at my sleeve. My companion suddenly leaped a wall. I followed. We found ourselves in the courtyard of a house. It was dark and still. We lay where we had dropped and waited. The mob came, turned the corner and raced on. Another moonless night, but all in our favour this time. Presently we emerged into the lane again. All was quiet at this end of the village. We turned back on our tracks for some distance, then turned

into another alley. We halted when we saw the watch towers silhouetted against the dark-grey of the heavens. They gave us a sense of direction and we went ahead, shuffling through the dust in the shadow of the balconies which overhung many of the houses like a lid to the street.

Most of the dwellings were shuttered and silent. Maybe the people of this quarter had all gone off to the other end of the village to search for the *ferungi*, for that was the direction in which the prisoners were last seen racing for their lives.

The memory of that nocturnal wandering is a confused impression of darkened sinister alleys, sudden alarms, a desperate fight with an Amazon-like female determined to scream her head off when we ran into her as she emerged too suddenly from a doorway, one or two occasions when we ran into a cul-de-sac, breathless moments while we lay in the dust and waited for searching guards to pass on—and then, abruptly, we had reached the end of a lane within a few hundred yards of the village wall. Though this was the quietest area of that much-disturbed habitation, we saw that it would be utterly impossible to get out of the place. It looked as if every inch of the great wall were swarming with patrols. They were marching up and down the walls in great bunches.

Well, we had to get over that wall. We could not fly over. But to attempt it then would have been lunacy. We sat in the shadow of a doorway and gazed across those few hundred yards that meant

everything to us, and discussed the situation in all its possible phases—and impossible.

"The only thing left for us is to go back, Digger. We gotta find some place to hide for another day. To-morrow night will be quieter. There'll be some place on the wall where we could skip over. I guess by that time they'll have begun to think we made the getaway. . . ."

"Easy enough to hide for the night. But to-morrow? What d'we do when daylight comes?"

"Depends on our hideout. We must get into a house—on to a roof, maybe, and stay there. But first we've gotta pinch some clobber for you."

I was of course in khaki breeches and tunic. Binns had never changed. He was still wearing the blouse, jacket and baggy pantaloons in which he was dressed when I first made contact with him. I was the danger spot. I saw at once that a change of clothes was the first essential of our safety.

We turned back. A little burglary was indicated. We crawled around the alleys, sought the most deserted quarter, and chose a fairly big house. We had to purloin clothes from the sort of place where they would not be missed—at least for a day or two. We cleared the forecourt with safety. Getting inside was another kettle of fish altogether; but after much agitated essaying we managed to prise open a shutter. The place was as silent as the grave, and as dark. It seemed to us, as we stumbled from room to room, that the dwelling had not been used for centuries. It was some sort of rest house or a little-used abode for the sick, for there were evidences

of such things in the chests and cupboards we ransacked for clothes.

I found sufficient to cover my tell-tale khaki, including a pair of stout gondola-style sandals, typical footwear of the country. My boots I buried under a mound of clothes at the bottom of a chest. Then we repaired to the flat roof of the building. Here, clearly enough, was the place for us. We could spend the night in this spot with comparative safety. What would happen on the morrow was in the lap of the gods. At all events, we had to take the risk. There was no other way. To continue prowling around the highways and byways would merely run us into greater danger.

There was a low stone wall about three feet high running round the coping of the roof. We could look over this on to most of the buildings in the immediate neighbourhood. The hour was late but faint sounds still came up to us as we nestled close into the shadow of the coping wall. I was not in the least inclined for sleep, having slept well during the day. Binns curled up and was soon well away. I remained staring out over the house-tops. Stars began to twinkle through the black dome above, filling the heavens with a pale-green hue, an erie sort of light—or was it my condition? The village sounds grew fainter, died away. . . .

Suddenly I sat up, alert, straining all my ears. There was a faint murmur of voices that seemed to rise from some place quite close to our hideout. I stared round the roof. By this time my eyes had become accustomed to the gloom. The night was

more than warm, heavy, sultry. There was no sign of movement about the roof. That soft murmur of voices! It was weird, ghostly. I confess to a feeling of creepiness—which I immediately put down to the strenuous living of the past few days. After all, one cannot hope to live on one's nerves without paying in some fashion. . . .

Then I saw the cause. I could have laughed outright with relief! Instead, I just stared and stared at this strange nocturnal tableau, with the feeling that my eyes were popping out on stems! I ducked down and began to tug gently at my companion. He sat up instantly, his hand grabbing the gun. His eyes were wide open. Binns was that sort of fellow.

"What——!"

"All right. No cause for alarm," I whispered. "Just wanted you to see this. If I'd let you sleep on and you'd missed it—you wouldn't believe any attempt of mine to describe . . ."

"What in hell are you talking about?"

"Look!"

I raised my chin cautiously above the coping and pointed. Binns looked over, muttered, "Mi-gosh!" Two blocks away there was in being the prettiest tableau one could hope to see anywhere under the stars of heaven.

Some seven or eight females, young girls and more mature dames, were disporting themselves about a pile of bizarre quilts and cushions. These women of the *harim* had apparently ascended to the roof of their abode on account of the heat. They used

no lights. They were strolling nonchalantly about, arranging their beds, secure in the belief that they could not be—overlooked.

The nocturnal shades lent beauty to those softly-outlined forms seen moving through the dusky night. In that romantic dimness there was an ethereal grace, a carefree joyousness about the spectacle that could not have been achieved in any other circumstances!

If we had searched the whole Moslem calendar, had we studied the blessed Koran from first word to final, we could not have discovered a more grave and unforgivable crime to commit than this—to peek upon the ladies of the *harim* in their sacred privacy and at the hour of midnight!

## CHAPTER VII

### CONTRABAND

COULD we have chosen a more dangerous corner of the whole village than the roof that overlooked the bedchamber of the *harim*? Hardly! We had only to be caught in this delectable gallery and our fate would be of a kind so awful that it cannot be hinted at.

While we peered through the dimness at that lovely picture of shadowy yet graceful lines etched into the gloom of the night, we conned over the wisdom of maintaining our perilous perch and debated whether we should leave it for pastures further afield.

Thus far we had been unable to detect any noise or movement in the abode immediately beneath us. So, when we grew tired of feasting and chuckling—what could you expect of two lone men?—by which time the ladies over there had snuggled down deliciously into their quilts, we realised there was nothing for it but to move on again. If we must be caught, let it be in some less hazardous spot.

We made our way through the skylight to the upper regions of this strange house, trod a cautious step down to the lower floors, and came to a dead stop at the corner of the long passage which we

knew led to the shuttered window by which we had entered. A thin pencil of light showed under a door of one of the rooms and from that apartment came the soft murmur of voices.

"Somebody sitting up late," quoth Binns, who did not appear to have recovered from the entertainment on the skyline.

Could we creep by that door without our presence being detected? Or should we wait? Someone might leave that room at any moment. There was a loud hoarse laugh—the laughter of a big man. I could feel my companion's start of astonishment, and wondered if he had the same thought as I. It was the voice of Lenhai! Perhaps I had Lenhai on the brain just then. Certainly I had cause enough.

We waited in the gloom of that passage for a timeless period, resting first on one foot and then on the other, finding some difficulty in breathing. It began to get on my nerves. The voices did not cease. Again that laughter. . . . Then, even more shocking, the laughter of a woman, one of those delightful carolling laughs that trill their way up and down the scale of joy. And of course I could not think of anyone except Mahrila! Which, as I told myself, was damned absurd! Brain storm. I bit my lip in the darkness. We must move, or I'd go crackers. . . .

We traversed that corridor in creaking inches, paused when we reached the door under which the light showed. Binns chanced an eye at the keyhole. He would. He started back suddenly, pointed at



the crack and gestured rather wildly, I thought. I looked, was so startled that I fell back on my heels with a bump loud enough not only to be heard in that room but all over the house!

Thereafter a frightful scramble down the remainder of the corridor, a wild leap at the shutter, which we flung open and left open in our haste, a scramble over the courtyard wall, and a swift padding of the dusty highway.

We had reached a melon patch and were sunk in exhaustion. Not another inch could we run. If they wanted us they could have a couple of *ferungi* for the taking.

"Didn't you know I had a weak heart," grunted Binns. "Of all the blasted simpletons! What did ye want to topple over like that for?"

"It was the shock at seeing that . . . that family gathering. Sorry, Binns!"

Family gathering was correct. It seemed to be our night for butting in upon other folks' domestic peace. It *was* Lenhai's laugh we had heard. That sweet feminine carolling *was* Mahrila's! There was someone else in the room. Nabi! Nabi, the handsome nine-year-old boy who was to be emperor of the coming Moslem Empire. It was a most astonishing picture we had peeked at. The man and the woman were reclining on a pile of rugs in that room and between them, with his head in Mahrila's lap, was the little fellow, Nabi! As nice a domestic hearth as one could wish to come upon.

"Yeah. I guess it was a shock at that. Of all the houses in this darned village—we must blunder

into that one! Can you beat it? Say! Mummy and Pop keep the boy up late, huh?"

"It certainly looked that way to me! Mummy and Pop!"

"What you'd call espionage?"

"Just so. I imagine it includes squinting through keyholes."

"Well, I guess we have something important to report—if ever we get out of this cross-eyed burg alive!"

"Getting all the fun you expected?"

"And then some, Digger, and then some. Paying a visit to the Amir of Afghanistan under escort has nothing on this Hell's Broth Militia trooping!"

We sat for a while munching melon. Our problem was further away than ever from any sort of solution. In a couple of hours or so the dawn would be up. One felt sure that as the night advanced the air grew more and more sultry. It hung about one as if weighted, still, absolutely calm. It was not the result of our exertions. It was the sort of deadly stillness that precedes the storm. We just did not know what to do next. There was no fire left in our heels. What was the earthly use of seeking another house, another hideout? We came to loathe that village, the heated, rotting smell of it.

Suddenly the lowering sky went completely black. The air about us stirred strangely, coming in stifling hot puffs, making it difficult to breathe. There came a great flash, the rumble of distant thunder. We stared in apprehension at the sky. It appeared

as if the heavens opened and great clouds, angry-red and ominous, began to race across the sky at terrific speed. The air whistled around us. Beyond the melon patch the date palms shook and rustled complainingly.

The first blast of the tropical storm burst simultaneously with a loud crack of thunder. The rain fell in gigantic sheets. In sixty seconds we were drenched to the skin. But we could not move, could not see, could not find a way to shelter in that blinding onslaught. For long minutes it beat down upon the cracked earth with unabated fury. Water tumbled down in cataracts, dashed along the melon channels like so many rushing rivers. The earth steamed. A few moments ago we had lain in thick dust. Now we were covered in slimy brown mud. And we must stay put, for there was no way out of the sheeting deluge. We crouched there with arched backs as if taking a beating. There was nothing to do but endure.

Lightning seared the sky with vivid flashes, illuminating every ditch and crevice where we lay. It was terrible in its intensity—but magnificent. The wind raced. Thunder cracked like a barrage of field guns. Yesterday—gasping for water. To-day—soaked. The rarest of storms in this Free Land of the Hills—and it had to catch us mooning away precious time in a melon field!

More than once I thought of those vague shadowy forms up there on the roof. What fun if we'd stayed—to see them scamper! And what fun if the Lord High Lenhai had found us on the morrow

perched on his roof! Above the fury we could hear the ominous crackling of the palms, the wrenching squelch as they were torn, uprooted; and we dug our fists in the sticky clay with some primitive idea of hanging on to mother earth, crashed into each other as the howling wind buffeted us this way and that.

Intermittently, between the roar of the wind and the ear-splitting crack of thunder, I caught the voice of my companion. He was crouching low, bawling in my ear. When the storm abated sufficiently to let us get to our feet—it would provide us with the supreme chance. Nobody on earth could watch a wall in such a blinding storm. The patrols would be just as helpless as we were. They could see nothing, hear nothing.

We clutched at each other, staggered crazily to our feet, floundered drunkenly across the rivulets and ditches of the melon field. Somewhere there was a wall! We knew we were on the outer fringe of the huddle of dwellings. The fruit gardens told us that much. Perhaps, if we could only keep on, that wall would loom up. . . . We kept on, tossed violently by the wind-swept deluge this way and that, zig-zagging along at a staggering run.

We must have presented an astounding sight, plastered with mud from top to toe, reeling about, hand-in-hand, slithering and sliding at the command of the mocking elements, tossed around like corks on a raging sea, performing willy nilly the dance macabre for whatever gods they are who roar with such laughter during these tropical storms. It was

a nightmare of a journey from that melon patch to the wall of freedom. In actual time it lasted probably half-an-hour. In that terrifying deluge it was beyond measurement.

Blindly we reached the wall. It loomed up through the driving sheets. An extended line of hundreds of bearded hillmen lay crouched beneath the buttressed wall. We reeled towards them. They did not even look up. Not that we cared. This was something beyond and above human factions. All men were alike under that storm. We stumbled along under the lee of the wall, jostling these guards who were out for our blood; but, if they noticed us at all, they saw only two wretched brothers whose pantaloons were soaked, caked with mud, flapping against uncertain legs.

We came at last to the steps, crawled up the slippery surface, reached the crest. Such was the force of the wind we must fight a way across the top of the wall, run sideways to defeat the sudden, unexpected gusts that whirled one about. Still hanging on to each other, we leap, landed headlong in the muck and slime beyond the village wall. Free! Free to continue our drunken dance through the driving sheets of rain.

Blind, dazed, we struck out like swimmers in deep water, except that we still held hands. It seemed that nothing could loosen that grip. Once we were blown against a jagged ledge of rock and the rain was hurled over us in waves. We clung to each other with the instinct to live, clung with every ounce of strength and concentration in mind and

body to the one solid thing in that roaring chaos about us—each other. We pressed on with a blind unreasoning instinct for self-preservation, panting for breath with aching chest and labouring lungs. There was panic in the crash and boom and snarl of this tropical storm, a shuddering horror, a savage hissing. The elements were fighting us, determined, as it seemed, to keep us pressed back upon that village so that we might be discovered.

In the long run the elements won. I stubbed a rock and pitched headlong, dragging my companion with me. Then a sheer wall of blackness. . . .

When I woke again the sun was up. We were in a cleft of rock which was warm and dry. Binns lying alongside. When I attempted to rise he pressed me down again with a firm hand. We had left the village but we were still in sight of it. We could not rise up and walk away without being seen by those watchers on the walls. We should be in full view of them. We essayed a crab-crawl from rock to rock, stopping anon to look back at the cursed wall. Did those guards believe the storm had penned us in their village? Or would they presently send out search parties to scour the countryside?

It was a heart-breaking progress. We were too spent to crawl far. We found a nest of dry rock and lay still. We could hardly hope to elude pursuers by crawling away. But they did not come out to seek us. They knew we could not get across the walls before the storm began. They were too well guarded. And they knew, or thought they knew, that no man could cross the walls during that raging

storm. Therefore the *ferungi* were still somewhere in the village.

We rested, sleeping by turns, benumbed, sunk in hebetude, waiting for another day to pass before we dared stand on our feet and walk. Soon the heat was beating down upon us and the clothes that had been sodden through and through became dry and stiff with hardened clay. It was maddening—that unceasing heave and fall of the heat waves. The lances of the sun broke and drove in under closed eyelids, an angry sun that kindled upon us and sucked every drop of moisture from our clothes, that sent us crawling for shade . . . and we cursed feebly because it hung throughout that livelong day like a great ball of fire in the brassy dome of heaven.

There was no movement between us and the village. No one had entered it. No one had left. One wondered whether the order had gone forth that no man might pass the gates until the *ferungi* had been found. When the sun sank it left us with bodies that still held too great a heat. The night closed over us suddenly. We sluiced at one of the pools and then started off once more.

Our sole object was to find a caravan road that would lead us to the Pass. It might take days, but there was nothing else to do. At least we should not suffer thirst. The storm had left pools in abundance. Hunger was another matter. It was twenty-four hours since we had eaten. We plunged into the night. We weren't holding hands any more, but we kept close together because of the black pall

around us. I had more than a suspicion that we were just drifting, and I thought of the cases of men lost in the desert or the bush, drifting around in circles. All we knew was that we had emerged from a gully and were hoofing over stony plains.

The night was uneventful, just a ceaseless plodding, and with the first sign of dawn we sank down in the shelter of a bunch of rocks and fell asleep. We could not, however, afford to waste many hours in sleep, for now we were well away from the village we must use these good hours of daylight in an endeavour to strike a caravan trail. A couple of hours' sleep, copious drafts of water for breakfast, and we were on our way again, feeling considerably refreshed and now ready for anything.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked, after some five miles of hoofing in silence—which was beginning to get on my nerves.

"Why, I guess I was thinking about what I should eat and drink and cuddle next time I got back to civilisation."

"Optimistic, by God!"

Another few miles of silence. One lived years in those miles of silence and sizzling heat.

"If I were a writer like you, Binns, I'd chuck this world wandering and settle down with a nice, homely wench."

"You would, huh? Guess that's every free-booter's ideal—while he's footloose."

Binns was not to be drawn. We trudged on in silence. The lumpy ground was hard going, but we'd been in worse places. . . .



"Omigosh! Look, Digger! Ain't that a caravan track?"

We ran that half mile or so, kicking up the loose flints and scampering along like a couple of school boys just freed from lessons. After trekking since early morning we had at last come upon a scratch across the plains that had all the appearance of a caravan road. We followed it for miles in a southerly direction and at a great speed. We decided to keep going until night descended. Hunger was beginning to gnaw and water is a poor substitute—though neither of us mentioned the fact.

Then it was that we overtook the camel caravan. There seemed to be a string of about twenty or thirty camels, all laden with merchandise. There would probably be as many *Provindahs*, armed to the teeth and the toughest travellers the world over. That *kafila* looked as if it were Peshawar-bound. Where else could it be going in this direction?

"Listen, Digger. We've gotta line up with these fellows. If we didn't they'd sense our presence sooner or later—and we must eat. Okay. I guess we look dirty enough even for those lousy wallahs. We are good Moslems from Baghdad—Baghdadis for short—working our way round the world and helping to spread the good work. All we have is a rifle, a knife and some cartridges between us, no grub, no clothes, not even a flea-bag. We lost 'em all during that terrible storm. Everything washed away down a gorge. We are making for Peshawar where we have friends who can help us—*mallum?*"

"Heavens! That's the longest speech you've

made to-day! Sounds crazy to me. But go ahead. You can always talk to 'em about Mecca!"

"Darn sure I can! But don't get sore, buddy. I'm going to make longer speeches from now on!"

And it was so. We caught up with the caravan. That bunch of *Provindahs* was about the fiercest-looking lot I had seen, and that is saying much for the tribe. They did not exactly welcome us. Binns talked his head off in a mixture of *Pushtu* and *Hindustani*. He explained our sad plight at length. It was clear, however, that we were not drawing any sympathy. These camel wallahs of High Asia are not only the toughest of men but also about the meanest. No one ever saw a well-dressed *Provindah*. He is always a bundle of rags—even though the rags may hide a wallet of precious stones. And he is for ever crying poverty.

It was not that they were suspicious of us. We were just a couple of troublesome beggars, brother Moslems who must be taken along and fed from a scanty store of rations. They gave us dates, raisins and pieces of flat dried bread. We made much noise in the relishing of these delicacies, as is the custom, brought down the blessings of Allah upon the brethren, and exchanged many salaams. So far so good.

The trouble came at sunset when we had to get down on our knees and throw up our hands in supplication to Allah. We dared not shirk that sacred rite. In for a penny, in for a pound! Well, we had heard the cry often enough to be able to give a fair imitation of it.

"*La ilaha Allah wa Mahommed-ar-rasul Allah!*"

"There is but one God, Allah, and Mahommed is His Prophet!"

That night we sat round the camp fire of camel dung and listened to Brother Binns telling of his pilgrimage to Mecca. He elaborated on his tale, describing the glories and wonders of the Holy City with very real enthusiasm, but all the time I trembled lest he should make some horrible *faux pas* that would land us into dire trouble. We were at the mercy of these wallahs, everyone of whom was a regular nasty-looking piece of work.

That night I slept with an eye half-open and my hand on the knife-hilt. Binns slept like a log. Once, in the small hours of the morning, I stirred, opened my eyes to find a dirty bearded face close to mine. My startled exclamation brought Binns rushing from slumber to grab his rifle. The *Provindah* grunted, explained he was keeping guard and passed on. I didn't like the incident and said as much. It was impossible to tell by these bearded poker faces whether we had been accepted as brother Moslems from across the Arabian sea, or whether they had guessed we were impostors. I doubt if the *Provindah* trusts anyone outside his own particular tribe.

We were on our way at dawn, the camels loping and swaying at a leisurely pace, grunting and grumbling whenever an attempt was made to increase their going. We passed from the waste of flat rock to a wide gully. There were rounded rolling foothills all around us, little green valleys, great

stretches of scrub and camel thorn, a valley not without colour and beauty, and I had no recollection whatever of having passed this way on that other occasion when alone I had made my way back to Peshawar!

The camels were *naaked* in a wide circle while we prayed and took our meals. Five times during that day we prayed, but we fed only twice. The valley seemed endless. Maybe it was a short cut to the Pass. While much of it was beautiful, there was one spot decidedly sinister. There were human bones there half crunched by the jackals—human enough to judge by the skulls. Whose the bones? Christian or Moslem?

The sight brought to mind a caravan route that runs across lower Egypt like a white line, for that too is marked by calcined bones—a beaten track across the sanded waste and so covered with human bones as to give the illusion of a long white road of chalk. A desert route thousands of years old.

We prayed again at high noon. How these Moslem fanatics loved to pray. There was no sham about it. They were rapt, engrossed, whole-hearted, raising their hands to heaven, bowing their heads in the dust. I shall never forget those prayers in which I had to take a part. It was a perfectly nauseating experience.

Another restless night and on again by dawn. The valley opened out wider and wider into a vast expanse. We passed through country dotted with fortified villages, and presently we saw the high

watch towers of the Zakka Khel—a particularly ferocious branch of the Afridi tribe. I recognised the area and so did Binns. He had passed this way on his visit to the Amir of Afghanistan. We both knew it for the most unruly spot of the Khyber Pass. That was why we felt concerned when the headman among the *Provindahs* decided to rest at one of the villages for the night before continuing down the Pass to Peshawar.

The Khan of the village came out to greet us, accompanied by his elders and councillors. There was much salaaming and bowing and flowery speech-making. We were led into the house of the Khan and there a great feast was prepared. At the gates of the high-walled fort servants ran out and took charge of the camels. The interior was dim and cool and pleasant. In one large vaulted room a number of rugs had been laid on the floor and we sat in a circle. The Khan sat on a mound of cushions at the head of the room.

A line of Indian girls, unveiled and decidedly attractive in their bright silken *saris* and flashing ornaments, filed in, each carrying a huge silver dish of food. It was the first decent meal we had had for days and we certainly did justice to it. Nor did the absence of cutlery affect our appetites. The meal finished, bowls of water were handed round and each guest washed from his fingers particles of food he had been unable to remove with his tongue. Fruit and coffee followed.

Then the room was cleared. We sat back against the walls and made sucking noises with our tongues



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INDIAN DANCING GIRLS



to show how pleased we were at having partaken of such an excellent repast. Men came into the room with weird stringed instruments and reed flutes. They began to play a slow haunting melody. Immediately the Indian girls rushed in, took the centre of the floor and began to dance. That dance must surely have been born in the desert. It was full of expression, had remarkably few steps, and was not confined to the small feet of those dancers.

It was a truly Oriental performance with all the symbolism and sensuality beloved of these wild folk of the Khyber country. As the girls swayed and pirouetted the music quickened. The movements of the whirling figures increased. Faster and faster grew the passionate movements. More and more daring the magic and subtlety of the flying figures. Soon each was a white flame, a mad whirl of rustling draperies, a flashing figure too swift for the eye to follow or the fascinated senses appreciate. And then, with a crash of strings, it came to an abrupt end. The men sat back again and roared their applause.

Presently we were shown to a small room which we might occupy for the night. It was significant that Binns and I should be separated from the remainder of the *Provindahs* and put into this room alone. We were, in fact, still under suspicion. This had apparently been conveyed to our host. As soon as we were alone my companion suggested a reason for the distrust that had been shown to us by the *Provindahs* from the start of our acquaintance. It was so rational a one that I was amazed it had not



occurred to us before—when we had had a chance to investigate.

“I doubt very much whether this caravan is going to Peshawar, Digger. I guess it will stay right here—in the heart of the Zakka Khel country. Tomorrow some sort of story will be handed to us, and we shall be politely but firmly requested to continue on our way.”

“Meantime, we have the whole night in which to scout around—investigate?”

“You said it. We’re going to take a looksee into those camel packs. Those beasts were heavily loaded. They weren’t carrying silk from Bokarah nor fruit from Kabul. That’s why they crawled so. They’ve crawled for a couple of days that we had to endure. They’ve been crawling for weeks—all the way from Tashend with brand new rifles and maybe thousands of rounds of ammunition, maybe!”

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE GUN-RUNNERS' STRONGHOLD

EVEN while we discussed the possibilities of searching those camel packs for contraband, assistance came from a totally unexpected quarter. Two of the Indian damsels appeared at the door of our bedchamber. They had been sent to us as guests of the Khan, we gathered, to help make the passing of the night under his roof one to be remembered with pleasure. Our impression was that they were there to keep us busy, to keep us occupied, otherwise we might take it into our heads to wander around this mysterious abode. By this time we had the measure of the Khans of this treacherous hill country.

They were most attractive girls, these Hindu belles, with rather fine, delicately-chiselled features—marred by great nose rings—slim, boyish lines, soft dark eyes, black hair pressed to the sides of the head Madonna fashion, arms covered with bracelets, slim ankles adorned with anklets of beaten silver and gold. They smiled shyly, yet with utter friendliness—as who should say: “We are here to administer to your pleasures. Do with us what you will.”

We soon disillusioned them. These girls were Hindus, and as such were as far beneath the Afridi Moslems of this household as we Christian infidels.

We thus had much in common. Their status in this village of the Zakka Khel was more or less that of dancing girl slaves. They had probably been kidnapped and brought to this village when they were children. In truth, they were little more than children now.

Knowing they could have no genuine feeling for their Moslem masters, we revealed who and what we were without further parley. Their attitude changed immediately. The art of the *houri* dropped from them like a discarded robe. They begged us to take them back across the border. We promised—providing they would help us. Our cards were on the table. We had more than a suspicion that this house was the centre of considerable gun-running among the Zakka Khel.

Events justified our suspicions. There was something pathetic in the way those two girls trusted us, clung to us. They passionately desired to return to their own people. Our *Hindustani*, with the unmistakable accent of officers of the British *raj*, did something to those girls that made them *our* slaves for as long as we should command.

We waited until about two of the morning before we started to make our way down to the dungeons of that strange abode, and though by that time the place was deathly still and silent, we knew there must be many guards about. I doubt if Binns and I could have found our way to the armoury without being discovered—but for the help of those girls. They assisted in a way that only such girls could.

They led us through intricate, labyrinthine passages,

down stone steps, along cavernous tunnels—until we came to the first real jolt. We crouched at the mouth of a dim corridor of stone, at the other end of which two heavily armed guards lounged against the iron-studded door which led to the armoury. Our object was to inspect this place, to see exactly what it contained without arousing anyone's suspicions. Obviously we wished it to remain intact until we could return with a force adequate to deal with this interesting situation!

The girls understood. They played their part. We watched them go forward, interested spectators in this game of man versus woman that is as old as the hills. Presently the amorous guards laid aside their rifles and equipment and keys and repaired to one of the rooms off the corridor. We leaped softly down the passage, scarcely making a sound in our native sandals. It was the work of a moment to grab the great cumbersome ring of ancient keys, unlock the door, and slip into the armoury.

Binns was in his element. He seemed to have a nose for sniffing out the traffic of gun-running. Was it not he who had first convinced us that the border tribesmen were no longer using the Pass rifle and were now equipped with up-to-the-minute rods of European manufacture?

We found ourselves in a musty smelling vault lit by naphtha torches. A veritable armoury indeed! Pistols, rifles, automatics, revolvers, weapons of every conceivable sort were stacked about the place. Some of the pieces were of ancient calibre, valuable rather as antiques than as deadly weapons of warfare;

but there were enfields, springfields and Russian types by the ton, as well as hundreds of German Mausers of the brand new nickel-steel type, piles of the familiar oblong cases of ammunition—enough powder and shot here to set the whole border aflame. This was no ordinary storing of contraband arms. The work was being carried out on too big a scale for that. Clearly there were great preparations for a gigantic upheaval, a bloody revolution that might well cost thousands of lives!

"I guess the arms manufacturers are working at full pressure in Tashkand," commented Binns.

"Look! Isn't that a French automatic?"

"Yeah! I'll say it is. As up-to-date as they come. One firing button, belt of fifty-five bullets, very light, can be carried like a rifle. Well, Digger, I guess that's all we wanted to know! Come on. Let's go!"

We went, sneaking along the passage until we reached our hideout. There we waited for the return of our accomplices. It never once occurred to us that those girls might betray us. The trust was mutual, instinctive. In the main the women of India are solid in their support of the British *raj*—the real danger is with the Moslem women, not only in India and beyond, but the world over.

Our trust had not been misplaced. They came, whispered the query: "Atcha, sahib?" And we answered, "Atcha." So far, everything was all right. The girls conducted us by many winding passages out of the building and across to the courtyard where the camels rested. The beasts had been relieved of the packs and the canvas-covered "mer-

chandise" was stacked under the walls nearby preparatory to being unloaded and removed to the armoury below—for we saw here more guns and ammunition. No wonder the caravan had come by such devious ways to this area of the Pass!

As members of the British forces of law and order, we were in possession of sufficient knowledge to get us hanged, drawn, and quartered by these wild Afridis of the Zakka Khel. We would need to leave this spot in the morning with all the courtesies and ceremonies of the Moslem Faith. That should not be difficult. There were, however, a couple of women on our hands now, pleasing damsels of the Hindu Faith to whom we had made a solemn promise. And to keep that promise was not going to be easy.

We repaired to our chamber. The girls were instructed to occupy one of the couches and to get as much sleep as possible against the exigencies of the morrow. They obeyed, curling up together like a couple of sleek cats, and were soon sound asleep. We stared at them, then at each other.

"Well? What in hell are we going to do with 'em?"

That query had occurred to me. Obviously they could not leave this abode in our company. That would be too much even for our generous host. They could not leave after us. That would not be keeping the promise. They must leave before us. They must make their own getaway just before dawn and travel south to some point where we could pick them up and convey them down the Pass to Peshawar.

Some few miles south of this great valley dotted with habitations of the Zakka Khel was Ali Masjid

Gorge. This, we knew, led into the Khyber Pass. It should be our trysting place. The girls could go in hiding there until we showed up. We spent the remainder of the night in watching by turns these slumbering damsels. We had them awake just before dawn. The situation was explained to them. They fell in at once, quite child-like in their faith and trust! We watched them go and hoped to heaven they would not be caught before they cleared the walls!

Our own getaway was simple enough. When the sun rose we joined the Khan and his brethren at prayers. Then breakfast. After which the Khan intimated that he would be pleased to permit us to depart. In very truth, he was relieved to see the back of us. We might be good Moslems from Damascus, but it was obvious he did not know Damascus, and with all that contraband around——

We cut through the wide valley at a brisk pace, glad to be free of that horrible tension of make-believe. We had had enough Moslem exercise to last us a lifetime. By noon we were in sight of Ali Masjid Gorge, and an hour later two girlish figures came running down the hillside towards us!

"Gosh!" grinned my companion, "like meeting a couple of birds on Forty-Second Street!"

We salaamed, passed on. The girls fell in behind us. We kept up the pace until late afternoon when we ran into a military post. There was a Tommy pacing up and down, a rifle over his shoulder, his great heavy ammunition boots white with the dust of the road. He must have had the shock of his life

when I spoke to him in English. His eyes opened wide and he uttered one word—"Blimey!" Then he swung round and yelled for the sergeant of the guard. A voice answered him somewhere beyond the barbed wire and concrete. Tommy explained that there were "a couple of Pathan wallahs and a couple of *bibbies*<sup>1</sup> here, and one of the Pathans was asking in English for the officer in charge of the post!"

Presently the N.C.O. came forth, hastily buttoning his tunic. Perhaps we had disturbed his siesta. I explained to him that we were not Pathans at all and repeated my request to see his officer. He conducted us to a bungalow. The girls were left on the verandah while we went inside. The officer in charge of the post was a youngster in his early twenties. He sat at a table fanning himself, a slim, wiry, ginger-haired youth with a tiny wisp of moustache, finely-cut features and attractive brown eyes. He was in open-neck shirt with the sleeves rolled back, Sam Browne, shorts, khaki hose and tan shoes. He was in fact typical.

He sat up with a jerk when I explained we were details of the Kurram Militia and had been out on a job.

"Sit down, you fellows. Smoke? Have a *chotah* peg? I say! Your mob has been in a pretty rough spot, what?"

"We've been out of touch for about ten days," I answered, sipping joyously at the peg of whisky. "What's happened?"

<sup>1</sup>Tommy's name for all Indian women is Bibbi.



"They seemed to have made contact with this blighter, Lenhai, somewhere in the Mohmand. The old swine got away, and the Militia seems to have returned pretty badly smashed up—lost a whole platoon, I believe. Anyway, they drove the blighter back where he belongs. Don't know what we should do round here if it were not for your levies. Your O.C.—Strong, isn't it?—he's a regular war horse. Came down the Pass with your mob, or what was left of it, a couple of days ago. I say! You should have seen him sitting that pony of his! He might have been on parade for the Viceroy with a company of spit-and-polish Bengal Lancers—instead of a straggling bunch of——"

"Disreputable scallywags!"

The young officer grinned. "A tough crowd, I gather!"

We spent the night at that post and early next morning continued our way down the Pass on a ration wagon, accompanied by the girls. It was a weird journey we made. At every military post we were called to a halt and the presence of two dirty-looking Pathans and a couple of *bibbies* on a British ration wagon had to be explained. Long before we reached Peshawar we were heartily sick of the performance.

Just what Colonel Strong thought of our losing a whole platoon he had left in our care never actually transpired. He was suddenly too interested in the story about the Zakka Khel and their gun-running activities.

We learned that only one of the two sepoys we had sent off with dispatches from the village

of the dead reached the column, and he was then more dead than alive. They had been held up by a band of Lenhai's men, had made good their escape. They had raced away at such a speed that when one of the ponies had stumbled and thrown her rider on his head he was killed instantly. The other continued his way alone, and it had taken him four days to come up with the column.

Colonel Strong had promptly turned the company about and made all haste back to the village. He found it utterly deserted—except for the vultures. Even then they had recognised some of the dead. . . .

"The company has been reorganised and reinforced. We were about to start in search of you two beggars when your message came through from the Ali Masjid Post."

"But . . . didn't you think we'd gone the way of the rest of the platoon?" queried Binns.

"Not a chance, Mr. Binns. We found Mr. Craven's orderly and four more of the rascals, trying to link up with us; and a pretty sight they were. How these beggars can exist for days without either food or water is beyond me. They told us how you were carried off by Lenhai's men. How the devil you got out of that blighter's clutches again is a miracle. You don't either of you need any congratulations from me. I fancy you both know what we are up against. Now then, about this Zakka Khel Khan. . . ."

All in the day's work! Strong was laying plans for a raid on the armoury. He proposed to march on to the Khan's stronghold and demand a surrender of the contraband forthwith. There was no time to

lose! On that occasion Binns and I had less than twenty-four hours in Peshawar to get ourselves cleaned up and fitted out with some decent clothes and equipment. Binns elected to remain a Pathan. So far the guise had stood him in good stead. But Lenhai and his henchmen now knew all about it. Instead of a disguise, it might well make him a marked man. Binns, however, was not to be persuaded into adopting any other form of dress.

“For a couple of months or more now I’ve been a pukkah Pathan, Digger; and, by the Beard of the Prophet, I’ll remain one till this louse of a Lenhai is brought to heel!”

## CHAPTER IX

### BATTLE OF ZAKKA KHEL

WE passed beyond the Ali Masjid Gorge once more, and this time with the column in full marching order, with ration wagons, ammunition carts, ambulance wagons, field kitchens, bag and baggage, inevitable followers of both sexes—like a company going into action. It was amusing the number of followers who followed our company—*dhobis* (washermen), *syces* (ostlers), *mochis* (cobblers), *darzis* (tailors), *naukars* (batmen and servants), all of them armed like bandits, all thirsting for a scrap.

This was one of those jobs about which the outside world hears nothing. The North-West Frontier is favoured with the spotlight of publicity only when an Afghan King is assassinated, or there is a revolutionary outbreak on a particularly big scale and the regular troops are turned out in battle order for a "Demonstration." But little of the skirmishes and engagements which occur almost daily ever reaches the outer world. Yet, it is just the efficient handling of these every-day jobs, the policing of No Man's Land beyond the Khyber, that keeps the northern gate of India secure against the horrors of stampeding revolution.

We came to the area where the Pass opens into a great expanse of valley many miles in extent, a vast territory speckled with fortified villages of stone, above which rise the watch towers of the ill-famed Zakka Khel, the savage clan of Afridis whom we now knew were preparing for an onslaught on a more than usually big scale.

And yet—our reception at the hands of the chief Khan was the most friendly ceremony imaginable. Nobody could outdo these treacherous devils of the border country when it came to the observance of the ceremonies of welcome. They always conducted them with the utmost politeness and decorum.

As we marched in column of route towards the village gates of the Khan we saw that an extended line of some eighty stalwart and bearded Afridis was advancing towards us. In the centre was the Khan himself, a giant towering above giants. They wore snow white turbans elaborately wrapped about their leonine heads, snow white baggy pantaloons secured tightly over the gondola-shaped sandals, the steel of rifles, cartridge belts and knives glinting in the sun. They advanced slowly, impressively, a murmuring chant of welcome rising and falling in time with their steps.

Binns and I rode at the head of the column on each side of Colonel Strong. As we drew nearer I glanced at the face of our tough little commander. His face was impassive, cold, unmoved. He was too old in the ways of the East to be taken in by any elaborate display of welcome. What troubled him troubled us all. Somehow, somehow, these crafty

devils had learned of our coming. That was obvious from the preparations they had made for our welcome.

"All of 'em in their Sunday-best pants and sich!" as our American correspondent remarked.

Could they have had time to rid themselves of the vast amount of arms and ammunition we had seen stored beneath that castle? That hardly seemed possible. Just the same, I began to feel a trifle uneasy. If this was to be another flop——

"They couldn't have gotten rid of the stuff in time," quoth Binns, voicing my thoughts.

"Couldn't they?" queried the Colonel. "It wouldn't surprise me, Mr. Binns, if they had!"

Admitting that nothing could surprise our commander in this land of perpetual surprises, I tried to take comfort from the fact that no one knew of our arrangements or the purpose of this march—except we three marching at the head of the column. If this thing fizzled out I should soon begin to get a reputation for irrational reports.

At twenty yards distance from the line of Afridi elders a halt was called, we dismounted, and approached the rulers of this unruly clan on foot.

"Since you insist on wearing that pantomimic get-up, Mr. Binns," observed the Colonel in a side whisper, "it shall be your job to sneak down into that cellar to see if the armoury is still intact. We'll search the Khan's village for the Afridi who committed that atrocious murder down the Pass—or something to that effect."

"I get you, chief."

That was the first either of us had heard of any-

thing in the nature of a plan. Simplicity was Strong's keynote. Neither Binns nor I had learned of any Afridi committing a particularly atrocious murder somewhere down the Pass. There were so many violent deaths in and around the Pass that one hardly stood out above another. But apparently one of these was to serve for our visit of inspection to this village. Meanwhile, Binns had the unenviable job of making his way down to those dungeons to see if the armoury was still in existence. And he accepted the job as if it were nothing more than an order to inspect the horse lines!

"In that guise you would get about more easily than any of us, I take it. We shall, of course, cover you, Mr. Binns."

The Colonel stepped forward a few paces and was received by the Khan. He answered the kowtowing of the elders and the salaams of the Khan with a slick military salute. The Khan was solicitous for our welfare. He offered us the Peace of Allah and the Blessings of the Prophet to all who so faithfully served the British *raj*, and so on, and so forth, *ad nauseam*. Just the same, he was more than curious as to the reason for this unexpected visit. He showed no recognition towards Binns and myself since we had cleaned up and removed our scrubby beards; but he looked queringly at the American's pantaloons and long loose jacket, and it was necessary to explain to him that this member of our company was a traveller rather than a soldier who had recently paid a friendly visit to the Amir of Afghanistan, and who preferred to sojourn in the garb of the country.

This seemed to please the Khan mightily, and Binns heard himself complimented on the manner he wore the national dress. The Khan, however, was convinced we should find no murderer within his village gates. The Zakka Khel, whatever their history might have been, were now a peace-loving people and desired only to remain in amity with the illustrious British governors on the border.

The Colonel just as adroitly turned the meaning of the soft words into a willingness to have us make a friendly visit. The column was marched through the gates of the village and as soon as we were inside the platoons separated and took up positions at the north and south gates, in the corn mart, and in front of the fort.

Altogether a delicate situation. Strong, accompanied by Binns and two platoon officers, followed the Khan inside the fort. It was my job to wander about the village and keep an eye on the platoons. At a warning blast of the whistle we were to make for the fort with all possible speed.

For me, this was a rare opportunity to stroll leisurely about the interior of a fortified village of the hills. Usually I was more strenuously occupied making a desperate effort to get out of such villages. In the Free Land of the Hills the habitations are very much of a pattern.

Each village is completely surrounded by a high wall, anything from five to ten feet thick, of great stone blocks bound together with a mixture of clay and chopped hay that sets as hard as granite. In some instances there are two gates, in others four,



according to the size of the place. These are bolted after the sunset prayers. Each gate is surmounted by a turret with loopholes for the clansmen who keep watch there. The chieftain, or khan, usually has his fort on an eminence overlooking the whole village, and this in itself is a miniature fortified habitation within the fortified village. Generally built of rough stone, but with interiors richly decorated and furnished, the fort also has watch turrets, or towers, on each corner of the courtyard. Unlike Indian villages, the houses of the khan's subjects are mostly well-built structures of two and three stories—of sun-dried brick or stone.

This particular village was more pleasing than most. There was a great square surrounded by the stalls of the local tradesmen, where the people foregathered in the cool shade of palm trees and sycamores. The place was remarkably clean for an eastern mart. It resembled the Indian bazaar only in the kind of trade that was carried on at one's feet. There squatted the cobbler, the metal worker, silk spinner, wood turner and scores of other craftsmen, all busy plying their trade, and nearly all were scarred and wrinkled old men.

Apparently youth was for feats of strength and valour in the hills, for marksmanship and banditry. Such muscular youngsters, mostly bearded, swaggered about the highways, curved knives in their silver belts, bandoliers stuffed with cartridges, rifles slung negligently, an overbearing arrogance about them that must be seen to be fully appreciated. One day they would grow old and unfitted for the life of the hills,

and there would be nothing for them but a craftsman's stall in the bazaar!

But even more picturesque were these Afridi women. Their scarlet satin trousers filled the streets with gay colour and were in striking contrast to the cold grey stone that abounded everywhere. These trousers were peg-topped and cleverly draped, so that at a distance they resembled hobble skirts. The long and daintily embroidered tunics and gauzy veils lent a touch of mystery and fascination, while the coloured sandals with tiny turned-up toes and the enveloping *burkas* (cloaks) completed an ensemble that could hardly be bettered anywhere in the world.

But, like the veiled women of other eastern towns and cities, these girls loved to stare through their *yashmaks* at the stranger in their midst! I know of no encounter so tantalising. One saw a pair of eyes, and that was all. These clanswomen have beautiful eyes, misty blue, not black like other women of the East, and the cynic who avers that eyes cannot speak should sojourn in the Orient a while. Some of these eyes danced mischievously, even if they did not wink, and heavy lids seemed to tremble with impulse. They could smile a welcome—to which one dared not respond, for to do so in full view of the arrogant and jealous clansmen would have been distinctly unhealthy.

Here was no jostling throng, but a quiet promenade of men and women of all ages, making their purchases, bartering and bargaining, surly-faced, raucous-voiced, gesticulating men, chattering, laughing and altogether jolly women and girls. One gathered that these

border tribesmen who were such gluttons for warfare, were really the most henpecked of men in the privacy of their own homes. Even in the streets there was that sort of demeanour between the sexes—very subtly conveyed maybe, but quite undeniable.

No painted, unveiled ladies here! No crafty-eyed brown youth sidling up to one's elbow to whisper of secret haunts where doubtful pleasures could be had for the exchange of a handful of silver. No wineshops, no reeking tobacco, no hashish, no bhang, no drugs to delight and then to stultify the senses, for these are strictly forbidden by the Koran. What these young giants did when they left their fortified homes on a visit to Peshawar, the Paris of their dreams, was another matter. Within these grey walls Koranic morals ruled the lives of the people. The women thrived on such laws. Mahommed must have been a feminist. No wonder the men were such surly, swaggering brutes, such tigers in a fight, so crafty in the art of sharpshooting. Man cannot live by bread alone!

I was attracted by the tap-tap-tap of a metal worker and paused for a while in the shade of his booth. He glanced up sharply, saw the hated khaki, the topee, and the other insignia of the British *raj*. He positively snarled as he pointed with bony finger at my shadow fallen obliquely across his wares. The infidel's shadow even was not to be tolerated. Perhaps it was to him an ill omen. I passed on. A plump little thing in sky-blue *burka* and the ubiquitous scarlet breeches gave me the full measure of her

smiling eyes. She seemed to be tickled to death by the incident!

But I was never so foolish as to turn round. I wanted to keep my head a little while longer. Besides, there would be trouble enough soon. It was approaching the noon hour and there had been no signal yet. What had happened to Binns? If he failed to turn up—just what would be Colonel Strong's next move? A hoarse voice suddenly rose in eerie chant above the soft murmur of the mart. It was the *Muezzin* calling the Faithful to prayer.

The place became strangely silent, the craftsmen had dropped their tools of trade, the people were prostrating themselves with their faces towards Mecca. I had the good sense to drop down into the shadow of a wall, also with my face towards the East, and wait for the ceremony to end. It was high noon. The hot air was suddenly alive with the chanting bass of these strange men. From my hiding place I could just glimpse the rearing watch towers of the fort. There, too, men were at prayer. This, then, would be the opportunity for Binns to get busy. As soon as this was over I must get back to my platoon. Anything might happen now.

In a few moments the people were upon their feet again, taking up life where they had left off. The streets were abustle again. There was the cry of vendors, the tap of the metal worker's hammer. The laughter and chatter of women was resumed as if nothing unusual had happened—as, indeed, nothing unusual had. This was their life.

I strolled towards the gates of the fort, where my

platoon waited. The gates were wide open. It was their task to see that they remained open—for their beloved commander was somewhere within that grey building.

Damn these bewitching eyes, thought I, as I left the fascination of the highways, the shimmer of red breeches, the shuffle of tiny sandals, and passed on towards the sterner occupation of police patrolling. I was within a yard or two of the gates when the air was suddenly rent by the piercing blast of a whistle. The platoon automatically sprang to attention. I ran forward, gave the order to march, and led them into the sacred precincts of the fort itself. We marched straight into the *Mihmankhana*, or chieftain's reception room, and there was Strong, accompanied by four havildars, calmly informing the Khan that he was under arrest! The elders and the fort guards stood about, not knowing quite what to do.

"Craven!"

"Sir!"

"You will take half the platoon and search this building from top to bottom. Mr. Binns has mysteriously disappeared. All right! Go ahead!"

A meaning look passed between us. I gathered from it that Binns had simply gone off to take a looksee at the armoury, and it was my job to tail him with a detachment of men in case the Afridi guards became too obstreperous. I made straight for the dungeons, thrusting aside the gaping guards, feeling as excited as the devil. Here we were, right inside the lion's mouth, so to speak, and that fellow Strong was as cool as a sexton in a village church.

And it was fun. We came upon Binns manhandling a couple of guards at the door of the armoury itself. We made short work of the Afridis, and crashed the door. The contraband was all intact, just as we had seen it on our previous visit. Our boys stared hard at the sight of all those arms, the stacked cases of ammunition. Every man was loaded up with "evidence" before we marched back to the commander. Strong's look of astonishment was a superb piece of acting. When it was explained that what lay before him was only a fraction of the vast store in the dungeons, he acted with slick promptitude. The Khan and all his twenty elders and mullahs and councillors were placed under arrest, tied together with halters, and a heavily armed guard stationed over them.

By this time the remaining platoons had rolled up. We were in possession of the fort, if not of the village. Wagons were brought. Every available man was put to the enormous task of bringing up the arms from the dungeons. The afternoon was advancing and we realised the advisability of getting clear of this village with our spoil before night set in. Thereafter, hour by hour, a steady procession of men labouring and sweating under the fatigue of transporting the guns from those cellars to the wagons in the courtyard.

The Khan and his elders stood in a roped line under the wall. The sight was not pretty. The chieftain had been gagged as a precaution—in case he took it into his head to issue orders of his own. Outside the courtyard walls the ominous growl of the gathering villagers grew louder, more insistent.

We had yet to get away with this audacious raid. Though in the very heart of a country whose people loathed and hated any sort of authority not vested in their own chieftains, this thing had to be done for the safe keeping of that part of the Pass which crossed a strip of the area. We were merely a company of levies, and vastly outnumbered at that. In the eyes of the wily Afridis we were just a bunch of robbers who, for the moment, had the upper hand. Their feelings at seeing themselves relieved of all this armoury can well be imagined, especially in a country where rifles and cartridges are amongst the most valuable things of life.

We marched out with the setting of the sun. A vast concourse of armed villagers, yapping wildly, pressed the flanks of our column, and it was necessary for us to march with guns at snap. Colonel Strong rode at the head. Immediately behind him trudged the Khan and his elders surrounded by guards, front, rear and both flanks, then the wagons of loot drawn by mules with a double-armed guard along each flank, after which came the baggage, kitchens, ration carts and followers, and the remainder of the company tailing the rear of the column—where the vociferous Afridis yapped at our heels like enraged animals robbed of their prey.

The march went stolidly on for an hour and gradually the tribesmen fell back, apparently leaving us to continue our way in peace. But we knew, every man Jack of us, that we should not be allowed to get away with the loot so easily—or their beloved Khan. There was trouble ahead. When darkness

came Strong called a halt. Camp was pitched. The prisoners and the wagons of arms were placed in the centre, and the whole company spread in an extended circle with hardly a pace between each man. Machine-gun crews took up their positions. We had enough ammunition to keep a battalion at bay until daylight!

We had known it would be impossible to get through to the Pass under cover of darkness. All over the Zakka Khel the tribesmen were massing for a determined attack upon us. Our spies came in with the news that great hordes were creeping towards us from every point of the compass. Our camp had been chosen with care—on the crest of a hill that overlooked the wide valley of the Zakka Khel, and where we found ample breastworks of crags and boulders. Just one of the thousands of natural forts so suitable for the guerilla warfare of this Free Land of the Hills.

The Afridis would stop at nothing to set their chieftain free. What, after all, were three hundred or so paid levies? They could put around us three thousand of the most reckless fighters on earth. True, we had the distinct advantage of position. It was worth two or three thousand men to be snug up there behind an almost continuous ring of breastworks. We had, taking the contraband into consideration, all the weapons and shot we needed. Altogether a lively prospect!

There was no moon. The dome of heaven was bespangled with myriads of stars which cast a pale, indifferent light, a soft violet gloom over all that countryside. Just the same, we could see the creeping



shapes, dark moving shadows in the night, for nearly an hour before the attack opened. It seemed as if they came out of the very bowels of the earth below us, hundreds of them, advancing from behind every bush and tree and stone, inching their way with hardly a sound. A stealthy, creeping stalk that was positively exciting to watch! We had our orders. We made no move.

Never shall I forget that hour of watching. It was the most thrilling thing of a life that has hardly ever been uneventful. Perhaps I am built differently from many men; but to me there could be no more fascinating pursuit than this—to stalk or be stalked! Crude, maybe, to one content to tread macadam all his life. It's all a matter of viewpoint. The World War, for instance, was not fighting. Just mechanical madness on a gigantic scale.

Queer things parade the mind at such moments as these, pictures created perhaps by those crawling shapes, many of whom were then creeping to their doom. One's whole life may pass before the inner eye at such times. For the waiting is always long, the nerves ever at stretch, the senses honed to abnormal sharpness.

And then the bellowing roar that rents the silence of night . . . the echoing ping-pung of rifles . . . the harsh scraping of hundreds of feet over shale and stony ground . . . lusting men climbing up. . . .

There came a piercing whistle and almost simultaneously our machine guns had broken into their reiterated hacking and clattering. The Afridis were rising up all around us like some grotesque swarm



[*Topical Press*]

NATIVE LEVIES IN ACTION

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of insects in the jungle. Machine-gun bullets sprayed them, sent them toppling crazily into the dirt. Still they came. Blood flowed this night and death hung over the valley of the Zakka Khel. Soon the hillsides were littered with the debris of battle . . . limbs, bodies, queer shapes that tumbled down into the gloomy depths; and it seemed we were having it all our way.

Spurts and tongues of flame stabbed the outer darkness. Yelps of pain, chopped screams, cries of hate, shouts of derision, a madman's laugh of triumph—all mingled with the chatter of automatic guns and the crackle of musketry; and we could grin behind the dust and sweat at these untamed Afridis come to release their tin god. For we were rolling them back, wave on wave, rattling their bones over the stones, pitching the guns from their hands to clatter noisily among the pebbles and flints of the valley.

We laughed too soon. A clop of hoofs, the steady beat of earth, that ominous concerted thud, and there weaved into view a line of madly-galloping horsemen. Instantly the machine guns focused them, sprayed a withering fire, broke the line. Wounded horses screamed—as only wounded horses can. Riders and beasts tumbled about in the wildest confusion, demoralising the other attackers and scattering them far more effectively than we could have done.

Even so, a number of horsemen came close in, leapt at our lines. A hell's broth of men flew at them, knife in hand, unseated them by cruel jabbing of

quivering flanks. Riders were picked up and thrown back among the confusion of men and animals. They went down in heaps, riddled where they lay, kicked to death by flying hoofs, beasts of four legs and beasts of two rolling and scrabbling inextricably about the rubble of dirt and stones.

And all the while the machine guns cackled and spat, spreading a leaden shower over the confused mass of arms and legs, men and beasts. The stench of shattered bodies rose. Again the lines rolled back. The attack fell to a desultory firing, intermittent flashing of rifles. The din of battle died down. Men moved about the broken ground, dragging their wounded after them, vague silhouettes in the dimness.

They had thought to take us by the surprise movement of a cavalry charge after their infantry had engaged us; but this crazy reversing of battle order had availed them nothing. We gave never an inch of ground. The solid phalanx of Hell's Broth Militia held firm as rock. There was that little matter of prestige . . . and a lost platoon. Officers of the regular troops, it seemed, referred superiorly to our loss of a whole platoon. One realised, in this battle of the Zakka Khel, how deeply that reprehensible episode had sunk. It did occur to me that a certain taut little commander had deliberately drawn this scrap in order to salve a reputation!

I stared from my squatting seat behind the gun—and wondered. The Afridis had left a lot of bulky misshapen things among the boulders, I thought. Well, I wouldn't put that past a fellow like Strong.

One never could tell what was going on within that taut little figure. He always had the pose of one who was holding himself in. But, heavens! Couldn't he burst wide open with his sudden decisions! He must have known of this from the moment the presence of contraband was verified, known it in detail, every move, even to the splendid strategy of this hill-top!

So many little people are vain. I suspected something of the sort regarding this buttoned-up martinet of an O.C. What was it that young devil at the military post had said: "on parade for the Viceroy with a spit-and-polish company of Bengal Lancers!" He certainly would be when he marched the column into Peshawar with truck loads of loot and a prize chieftain of the Zakka Khel!

But the night was young. They came again, yelling fanatics who wouldn't take no for an answer. Hordes of them in a black mass, dying for the Faith and the release of a beloved chieftain. The violet gloom was split with tiny flashes. Musketry opened the echoes of the hot valley once again. They knew our numbers. It was inconceivable that we could hold them back indefinitely!

Again we waited—until they were waist high, then opened out with a volley of rifle fire. No check. The machine guns cut loose with a splatter like hail on a corrugated roof. That certainly checked them. Somebody was operating the *mitraileuse* we had found among the contraband. It rose above the rest in a crescendo of terrifying snaps and snarls. It sounded deadly and it certainly was! The line

bent back, gave way. They continued in frantic rushes, dropping here and there like rotten sheep. What unholy slaughter was this!

Hideous faces rose up before one and were blotted out. Hell's Broth Militia was leaving its mark in the valley of the Zakka Khel. This second attack was more hopeless than the first, despite the vast numbers of the attackers. Again and again the lines of burly bearded maniacs weaved up, again and again they were swept back, broken, routed, scattered in blaspheming heaps. . . .

It went on and on, and there was never a moment's pause in that terrible onslaught. Soon I was conscious of the wounded lying around me, men cursing and groaning while they strived to raise a weapon, press the clips, jerk a trigger. And after all that frightful slaughter, it was the coming of another day that saved the situation for us! When the light came up the Afridis would not stay to be peppered any more. They turned tail and scattered along the valley, stumbling over dead animals and dead men.

A tight little figure swept past me, his revolver barking.

"Charge!" he bawled.

The boys rose up and raced after the fleeing tribesmen, potting the wounded stragglers, bayonetting the fallen, kicking up a terrific hullabaloo in that wonder of a dawn. It was a ghastly spectacle. These levies of ours, with their bloodshot eyes and dirty sweating jowls, were not taking any more prisoners. For an appalling half-hour there was no stopping them. They ran and stabbed and shot and bludgeoned

until they dropped from sheer exhaustion. What a countryside! What a morning! What a shambles! . But what did it matter? What did anything matter? Hell's Broth Militia had retrieved its vaunted reputation!



## CHAPTER X

### A PIPE OF HASHISH

THE delivery of a bunch of prisoners and our seizure of contraband in such alarming quantities caused something of a sensation among the powers-that-be in the Border Province. Our prestige was restored. Hell's Broth Militia was, after all, a force to be reckoned with in this turbulent area of High Asia! The affair also gained for us a little respite, a trifle of rest and recreation in the city of Peshawar. We certainly needed a breathing space after that gruelling night in the hills, followed by a forced march down the Khyber Pass to the great military cantonment at Peshawar.

For a city occupying so strategic a position Peshawar is surprisingly ill fortified in a country where fortifications abound everywhere, where everyone goes about armed, and where the British Tommy sleeps with his rifle chained to his wrist. The only defences of the city itself are the mud wall that surrounds the place and a small fort; but a couple of miles west of the city there are the huge cantonments, with garrisons of various regiments, batteries of artillery, flying corps grounds and depôts, and all the miscellaneous paraphernalia of a vast army of

occupation—for the military units of the Frontier are always on active service.

Peshawar is the seat of extensive commerce between Asia and India and down to the western world. To this caravanserai Bokhara sends gold, silver, lace, hides; Kabul sends horses, mules, fruits, woollen and skin coats. The bazaar of Peshawar is famous the world over. For an eastern city it is amazingly poor in architecture but a rich cosmopolitan centre in merchandise. Here the camelteers and merchants from Central Asia meet the babus from all over India and even the buyers of the big stores from Europe and the United States.

It remains unadulterated—thoroughly eastern. It welcomes the trade of the west but never sacrifices the Orient. It will never become a second Cairo. It has remained unchanged for twenty centuries and more. Processions of camels lumber through the streets. Groups of Pathans squat in the open-fronted shops and drink green tea, chew walnuts, munch raisins. Women of the sinister sisterhood, their black hair adorned with barbaric gems, eyes darkened with antimony, fingers and toes smeared with henna, look down from verandahs. Up there, too, is the mysterious trade of drug-vending. Dancing boys are to be found in another quarter and are, in fact, more popular with the natives than these other swift transports to the haunts of pseudo delights. Veiled women flit in and out of the swaying throng. Hill-men with black bobbed hair curling round their turbans stroll majestically, eyes flashing with excitement and anticipation.

Binns and I decided that this was the opportunity to look into the soul of Peshawar, to see whether its evil reputation were historical fact or merely the dark imaginings of romantic tale spinners. We knew it would be hopeless to attempt such a sojourn as visitors from the West. The East is jealous of its secrets. It does not bare its soul to every curious infidel. There are dives and dens specially run for the visiting sightseer from over the seas.

By this time we were quite at home in the garb of the border. Naturally we chose to do our wandering in the dark hours. The swirling crowd *was* sinister then. It required no stretch of fancy to see it bent upon pursuits as dark as the night.

We were jostled by Hindus who walked almost naked, fat Babus who wore frock coats and funny pillbox caps, swarthy tribesmen in full regalia and armoury, merchants in flowing silken robes, brown youths with handsome smiling faces and roses behind their ears, chanting beggars, fakirs, sepoys of various Indian regiments, lean human monstrosities who tortured their bodies in the name of religion.

They were all there, an animated, heaving movement like that of a disturbed ant hill. Sound, sight, smell typically Eastern. Sensuous, mysterious, a painted veil of legend over the face of this seething thing. One came closer to realities nevertheless. It was night and the city gates were closed. Locked within this cosmopolitan centre of Asia one saw the more intimate side.

We strolled down the dark narrow alleys, into first one house of delight and then another, and we

knew as we progressed further and further into the heart of this atmosphere of secret vice that these things, so far offered, could be purchased by any drunken sailor in other ports besides those of the East.

"I am convinced there is more in it than *that*," quoth Binns.

"Persistent devil," I murmured, just as eager to sample anything once.

We saw the combat of fighting quails, where the owner of the winner received the prize of a beautiful boy, and heard the loser murmur in scornful tones that there were other beautiful boys. . . . Nautch girls swayed and pirouetted, worming their supple bodies in voluptuous rhythm for our especial delight. Kashmiri maidens, fair as lilies, features of a fascinating purity, moulded flexible forms of startling beauty, ministered to our appetites for strange foods and stranger drinks.

Man is an insatiable animal.

The captivating houris of Peshawar, plying a trade as old as the Himalayas, had a code all their own. Discriminating, aloof even, theirs were no trashy cash contracts. They adored jewels, worshipped them, were swathed in glittering geegaws from the tips of their smoky tresses down over softest curves and contours to rounded scarlet toes. Perambulating jewellery caskets of the most exquisitely-turned craftsmanship, any of these might go into pawn at the turn of fortune's wheel for a mere million rupees.

"Kinda cute, huh?"

Expressive devil, this lithe, long-muscled writer

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fellow with the quizzing Irish jowl. He certainly had that natural instinct for ferreting things out—with his nose down and snooping with a sort of comical earnestness, as if to say these things were all a matter of scientific research. I once knew a case of an eminent psychologist and criminologist who was caught on a dark night in a public park with a girl of easy virtue. I did not meet a single man who believed his story. Certainly the law courts didn't. But the admirable thing about the fellow was he didn't care two hoots whether anybody did believe him.

As Binns remarked on that night of strange memories:

"You can't stay on the side of the angels if you get your wings singed."

And then, after we'd grown tired of watching the geegaws twinkle in unexpected places, we decided we were trespassing upon the time of these expensive ladies. We left. Boredom is the world's worst crime. The East, unlike the vaunted civilisation of the West, never bores. Man is always seeking. No matter what he seeks, he can find it in the East, providing he seeks long enough. The wildest, dope-ridden fancies of the most depraved novelist have nothing on these misprized children of the Orient. A normal imagination could not conceive the things they do.

I am ready to concede that we were peradventure a trifle fuzzed with the things we had eaten, drunk, seen and sampled—when that bewitching jezebel of the smiling lips and starry eyes beckoned to us from the shade of her balcony. How could we at this

time and in such state properly appreciate that our every step was being watched. We thought only of these deathless delights which she offered.

There were others present—a dozen or so of men and boys dressed pretty much as we were, only these other fellows were the real thing. They had smoked the pipe before. So we squat on the quilted couches and inhaled from the hashish-charged hookahs and tried to look as if this were a nightly indulgence with us.

For my part, my first reaction was to feel as sick as a dog. I stared at the bubbling water in the head of the hookah and wondered how long I could hold out before making a thorough exhibition of myself. The danger passed. There came a mild glad wonder of the soul. Life took on an entirely heightened hue. Every common thing about one became highly coloured, emphasised, exaggerated. Before my eyes were colour symphonies of a delicacy and variety quite beyond normal experiences. I felt liberated! The secret, I told myself, while I was still able to tell myself things, was this new and altogether enchanting rhythm to life. My skin prickled, tightened. This was the summit of all experience, the limit of sensation. The rhythmic beat of the blood knew it all.

I suppose the dancers were actually there—though I have never seen such wondrous forms of men and women before or since. Certainly I heard the throb of drums, the wail of lutes. Maybe those musicians were as drugged as I. This was dancing such as comes to one only in dreams. It seemed that my

vision singled out one of those dancing figures—stayed with her, followed her every entrancing movement. She was half-dream, half-reality, this wraith-like form that moved with slow unexpected subtleties. The white flame of her fascinated the senses. The drums were tapping my skin. My pulse beat with the rhythmic throb. I was caught up into the fiery essence of her whirling form, burning in answer to her fire.

The dance quickened. The swifter movement gathered itself into my pulse. I was caught in the spirited joy of her soaring soul, lured on into the night of time to heights of hitherto unperceived happiness. For no limits bound the perceptions in that joyous nocturnal world of colour and beauty.

And all the time I drew slowly and peacefully at the stem of the hubble-bubble, even while the imagination raced and the blood beat more and more swiftly. In her movements was the story of a great love, the song of her being, the mystery of all human kind exquisitely revealed.

Suddenly it was all too meteoric for even my heightened senses to follow. Something jarred in this world of beauty and colour and blissful movement. It shocked and shook one like a blow. I fell forward, remembering in those last crazy moments of consciousness, how I clutched with both feeble sweaty hands at the bubbling glass vessel of the hookah.

The aftermath was not pretty. Physically it was nauseating. But through the dull, drab, dreary grey-ness of reality the mental visions of that experience

remained. Even in the sickening moments of awakening it all appeared eminently worth while. It brought to life ecstasies and beauties that no other means could. It left in the secret recesses of memory things that can never be erased.

No. With Binns and his temperamental partner ("Try anything once, would you!") there were no regrets. On the contrary. It was not the reaction of dull ache and fogged brain that worried us. It was the fact that we awoke to strange surroundings and to the knowledge that we were very effectively trussed-up, aching limbs bound so that we could not stretch, prisoners of some crazy wallah in this nightmare of a city.

We must unknowingly have walked into the den of our enemies. Hell's Broth Militia was a much-hated force in this country of intrigue, sedition and sudden death. And for obvious reasons. It happened that we were somewhat prominent members of the company. It was all very simple. We did not awake and ask ourselves what was the meaning of this. We knew. In all conscience, we had made every necessary move up to now! It would be interesting to see who made the next.

It was a bare room in which we found ourselves—four walls, a door, and a heavily-barred window. Whoever they were, they had decided not to take chances with us. Fresh air blew in at that unglazed window, a soft murmur rose from crowded streets. Evidently we were high up in this building. Binns and I looked at each other, then at the window bars. Morning sunlight was streaming in. His mouth,



like mine, was covered with tape. That *was* a mark of Lenhai's, though not necessarily his.

My companion threw himself about the floor by sheer abdominal muscular action until his face was touching my feet. He worked the indiarubber muscles of his jowl furiously and at last had looped the centre of the tape over the pointed turn-up of my sandal. He tore savagely. The tape came away, bringing the skin of his jaw with it.

"Thought they had us taped, huh? Roll over, Digger, and get your pan alongside mine!"

I did so. Binns began to chew my face off—at least, it felt like that! I think I've referred to his tombstone teeth before. I knew the strength of them on this particular occasion. By the time he had finished, my mouth felt as if it were in ribbons. We lay and panted for a while.

"The way you slobber over a fellow."

"Yeah. I guess these dirty wallahs know how to use tape. How d'ye feel, Digger?"

"Like a first class hang-over."

"Well, I guess we ain't waiting for any guy to tell us what to do. All this may be somebody's idea of a joke, but I doubt it. Heave your carcase up a bit. I'm going to use my teeth on your wrist cords."

He did, gnawing and tugging, grunting and spitting for the better part of an hour. At last my hands were free. I worked the numbness out of them and started in on my companion's wrists, working in a fever of impatience lest some one should come in at that door and upset everything. In a short time we could raise ourselves on tottering feet.

We made for the window. It was not more than breast high. Copious draughts of fresh air restored us.

We were looking down upon house-tops. People in the streets were plainly visible. Maybe four or five stories up. There was a flat roof below us with a drop of about eighteen feet. That was a mere step to us—always providing we could wrench out one of these iron bars. The structure was of sun-dried bricks. It seemed to depend on how far the iron was sunk into the brickwork. We were in a hurry, naturally, for though it was still early in the morning, to judge by the sun, there could not be any time to lose. Picking up the pieces of rope we knotted them round one of the bars and used our combined strength in pulling on it. Suddenly it gave way, bringing down a rubble of dust and broken brickwork, and fell with a devil of a clatter into the room.

If those who were set to watch us were not still under the influence of hashish—they would be along at any moment. We dived for the window, using the rope for four or five feet of the drop and risking the remainder. Instinctively we looked up from where we dropped on the flat roof, saw a face at the window. It was our old friend Mahrila. The pale oval of her face was contorted and not quite nice to look upon. The smouldering eyes were burst into angry flame. We waved, gave her the Peace of Allah. Her answer was most unladylike.

“Did ye fly over, Mahrila, or couldn’t you find your breeches? We left ’em behind that last time we visited you!”

The head disappeared. She wasn't interested. Knives flew through that window with startling aim. They followed us as we scrabbled about the roof on all fours. One bit into my leg just as we reached the parapet. Then they stopped. They could not be throwing knives over into the street below. That, in fact, was why they had not fired upon us—afraid of rousing the attention of passers-by.

“Nice kinda people to spend an evening with, huh?”

We could then afford to be facetious. The street might be fifty feet below, but it was broad daylight, and if we could not find a way down there, we could yell our heads off until somebody looked up and took notice. That was just how we felt this bright and sunny morning. Little more than an hour ago we were lying trussed and taped and the situation looked altogether hopeless; but these nitwits had imprisoned us together again—thinking the tape would cover a multitude of verbal scheming—and they had also reckoned without the teeth of one Binns. That was the occasion remembered as the one when we bit our way out.

We lounged on the parapet and looked down on the street below. The world seemed to be waking to the bustle of another day. It all looked very peaceful. But it couldn't be as peaceful as all that. Had we not collected seven wicked-looking knives from this very roof? Pretty souvenirs they were. I remember Mahrila's head came forth again. I pointed a knife playfully. She ducked hurriedly.

It must have been pretty maddening for her and her henchmen, seeing us so close yet so inaccessible. Just the same, we were hard put to it to find a way down to the streets. It was a sheer drop, straight unbroken façade of building. We watched the throngs go by. Drift of drowsy voices rose.

"Guess we'll be late for reveille and all that, Digger."

We could have yelled for attention, but we did not wish to draw attention to our presence there for a variety of reasons. We explored the length and breadth of the roof. Apparently this building stood out from the taller stack. There were open windows immediately below us on three sides, and at one of these a small timbered verandah with a gaily-striped awning. There appeared to be no other way. We took off our long loose Pathan shirts—worn over the pantaloons—and started to tear the coarse material into strips. With the aid of the knives supplied us by Mahrila's boy friends we had soon fashioned a length of rope. It would cover some eighteen of the twenty-five feet of drop on to that sunblind.

Binns insisted that his weight would sag the awning and prevent any possibility of a slither into the street below. I was not at all happy about that. In the end he struck the brilliant idea of jabbing with a knife as he left the tail of the rope and struck the sun hood. We made fast to the coping and threw the rope over. I watched him slide down the rope, panted for breath when his hands were clutching the tail-end of it, held my breath when he let go, dropped

on to the canvas and dug with the knife. He slipped crazily along as the blade tore the wretched canvas, hung on to the framework for perilous seconds, then fell through the hood to the balcony underneath.

I followed. If I had hesitated for a second after his disappearance I should have been too much of a coward to essay the wild plunge. My fingers slipped off the end of the rope before I realised I was there and down I went, straight through the billowing rent of the awning on to the balcony.

I lay where I had fallen with Binns holding me down. Just above our crouching bodies was an open window backed by what looked like a curtain of black velvet. It was difficult to see in the dimness of that shaded balcony after the glaring sunlight above; but we could hear a soft murmur of voices coming from that room. They were not hoarse or guttural sounds. Women in there, we decided. Well, whoever they were, they stood in our path. There was no other way left open to us now. We were crouching in the corner of a small balcony and the drop to the street was too much of a good thing.

"A *harim*, by God!" croaked Binns. "We *would* drop into a place like this!"

We lay until the panting intakes were no more and the excitement of the crazy leap had died down. Some one from that room might open the black curtains and step on to the balcony at any moment. There was no point in waiting for trouble to come out to us. We'd better go forth and meet it. At all events, better to be discovered in that room than on

the strip of verandah with nothing but these slender rails between us and the pavement below.

We stood up, reached for the curtains and leapt into the room. It seemed as if a dozen women started screaming at once. By all the powers! *Harim* indeed! And its occupants in various stages of undress. We did not stay to make any further investigations but bolted across the room, leaping couches, knocking over tiny tables, shooting crockery all over the place—while the piercing screams of the ladies rent our eardrums. This was the final insult. This the sin of sacrilege. We had invaded the sacred precincts of a Moslem house—the *harim*! If we were caught now we should be torn limb from limb or subjected to the Koranic law of a thousand cuts.

A bellowing roar came up to us as we emerged on to a corridor. The ladies were telling the household, at the topmost pitch of their voices, that two unpronounceable males had dared to enter their sacred abode, and their lord and master was asking where the blankety-blank-blank they had gone. We had gone blindly along that passage, not knowing, not caring whither it led. It was our good fortune that the master of the house should be ascending from the other end.

A flight of stairs faced us and we took them in our stride. Not until half-way down did we realise that two men servants were coming hastily up. We all four went down in a heap at the bottom, but as the other two were naturally underneath we could be said to have had the best of that encounter. They lay there, anyway. We dashed on,

landing into a perfect maze of dusky alleyways. In two minutes that peaceful household was a regular tornado of clamouring voices and stampeding feet.

If the situation had not been so fraught with peril for two cracked infidels, it might have been quite laughable. One has laughed at it many times since; but just then, with our stumbling feet carrying us, willy-nilly, in and out of the warren of passages and rooms, where every few strides brought us up against some bawling and terrified servant of the house, speedy decisions and slick thinking became a matter of life and death.

We came to an open-fronted room where the sunshine blinded us, literally leapt the intervening space and into the courtyard. We reached the heavily timbered outer door but did not stay to fumble with bolts and bars, instead we used the heavy cross beams to clamber to the crest of the wall. We fell into the street and ran. We could still hear the hullabaloo from that house as we cleared the corner. In a few moments we had dived into the heart of the thronged highway and were proceeding at a more or less leisurely pace while our beaten lungs panted for air.

We must have looked a pair of rapscallions, anyway, for the discarding of our shirt-like jackets in making the rope had left us with blouse, embroidered waistcoat, baggy breeches and sandals. Our turbans had gone some time during the night. The sun was blazing hot and we knew all about it. That was why we slunk along to the bazaar for

shelter and with some idea of trading our collection of knives for a couple of turbans. No Peshawari in his senses would walk about under a blazing sun without his turban. Besides, it's real bad manners for a Moslem to walk around in public without his headgear. He never takes it off, except to go to bed, not even in the mosque—he takes his sandals off there. We were, therefore, under suspicion from the moment we stepped into the street. Men turned and stared. It was the season when even natives were dropping down at the rate of a hundred a day from heatstroke and sunstroke.

We dipped into a booth and offered our knives for a few yards of puggaree cloth. The ancient shopkeeper sitting in the middle of his piles of materials, took the knives, gave one glance at them, and eyed us sharply. He saw two sun-tanned faces, scrubby of jowl because unshaved for forty-eight hours, skin torn where the tape had been stuck, dirty, sweaty faces, marked as it seemed with a night of dissipation. He stared again at the knives balanced one on each hand, shook his head.

The ancient stall-holder was a Hindu. He was lean, emaciated, with deep-set mournful eyes, long melancholy nose, blackened teeth from too much betel-nut chewing, long wisp of grey beard. He could not understand why two good Pathans who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca and brought back beautiful curved knives from that holy city—should now be trying to trade them for a paltry bundle of cloth!



And as he talked, curious passers-by stopped and looked and listened—until I could feel the back of my neck beginning to creep and the hair of my tousled head rising. Nothing would please this Hindu more than to be able to sneer at Moslems who somehow had got themselves in serious conflict with the laws of their Faith. We tried not to look as discomfited as we felt! Personally I could have taken him by his stringy throat and pitched him into the street. But that would do no good. We were drawing enough attention as it was. We must surely have left a trail of suspicion from that alarmed household right up to this scoffing Hindu's stall.

I caught my companion's sidelong glance. Somebody immediately behind the bench on which we sat was also jeering—and he was not a Hindu! It was extremely unlikely that he would join a Hindu trader in gibing a brother Moslem. This fellow behind us knew we were not what we posed to be. Did he know, too, of that frightened *harim* back there? In a minute the whole bunch of them would be sniggering.

I saw the flush mounting up to my friend's temples. Well, if there were no other way, we could always rough-house a way out of the predicament. Binns spoke sternly to the Hindu, informing him he could either hand over the knives without further parley or the required turban cloth. The ancient recoiled for a second, then recovered himself. He had drawn a crowd to his stall, and what could be better for trade than that? Moreover, the people

were clearly siding with him in this entertainment of baiting a couple of youths from the hills.

Binns tried again. I tried again and again. It seemed we were but helping to entertain the mob. Even then all might have gone well if it had not been for the particular member standing behind Binns. He raised a laugh by tweaking my companion's ear. That tore everything. We jumped up from the bench and swung round together. My friend's great paw shot out, landed with a crunching smack on the pate of the scoffer, and over he went, knocking others in his tumble.

Thereafter a perfect family scrap. We sailed in with a will. Our pent-up feelings gushed forth in a wild scrabbling at the astonished faces around us. These lads knew little of the art of fisticuffs. It happened that we knew enough. In a few moments pandemonium reigned around that Hindu's stall. He soon began to regret starting this entertainment. His stall was thrown over in the scuffle, his goods scattered, filched, the whole place wrecked, while he stood back and wrung his terrified hands. The mob grew. Moslem hit out at Hindu. Women ran screaming. Sticks and knives flew through the air. The man who had tweaked an ear was somewhere underneath the scrimmage. Binns and I stood together and endeavoured to fight a way out of the seething, pushing, jostling, stabbing mob.

But it was not easy. The crush was now too thick and too heavy to force a way through. We lashed out right and left. Of course it was fun. But it was also broad daylight and the thing was

growing into a riot. The native police would be upon us soon, and if they could not quell the disturbance—the troops would roll up! That was why we fought like trojans to break a track through the unholy scramble.

The shouts and yells of the infuriated mob made an appalling racket. It brought the inevitable result. A detachment of native police rushed in belabouring all and sundry with their iron-shod staffs. Skulls were cracked and faces gashed, limbs broken and more stalls wrecked as the mob was driven back in a massed body. Women were calling shrilly for help and men mouthed vile oaths. The police were making little headway. That was obvious from the sudden blast of whistles.

We had not bargained for this. The riot had developed. The troops were coming up. An officer on a charger rode straight into us and his detachment with fixed bayonets closed us in fore and aft of that tunnel of a bazaar. It was all over when Tommy rolled up. Nobody wanted to fight any more. Unfortunately, Binns and I were right in the middle of the mêlée and we could not break out. Now it was too late. All we had got out of the fray was a turban apiece! But we were prisoners with, the rest of the mixed bag.

Nor was there any chance of escaping when we were marched off to the <sup>1</sup>*thana*! Those tough little Tommies saw to it that no man should break away. There was nothing for us to do but keep step with the rest of the prisoners—nearly a hundred—and

<sup>1</sup>Native jail.

take our medicine. And to think that all this had grown out of a determination to try the smoke of hashish just once!

“Well, buddy. I guess we are in a jam again.”

It certainly did look as if it were becoming a habit!

## CHAPTER XI

### THE MAD FAKIR'S SECRET LAIR

"SINCE you fellows are so fond of running about for experiences," grinned Colonel Strong, "I'll let you stay in here and get a taste of native prison life."

"But—for three months, sir!" I gasped, appalled at the idea.

"Well, now, all that time won't be necessary, will it?"

"I guess it won't, chief. Digger and I could manage to get all the experience we want of this prison in three days!"

Our commander stared at us with his characteristically whimsical expression. He had come to the jail where we had been dumped with the rest of the rioters from the bazaar in response to a message we had sent. He had listened to the tale of events that had led up to the incident in the bazaar—and had then decided that a taste of prison life among native thieves, thugs, bandits, stranglers, seditionists and other criminals would do us good!

We had informed him in our message of the contact made with Mahrila—now wanted for complicity in the death of an airman, the theft of a 'plane, and for firing from an airplane upon British forces. And though a detachment had been sent at once to the

house we had indicated, Mahrila had, of course, flown.

"Your being in jail might be a most fortunate coincidence," pursued the Colonel. "Lenhai seems to be lying low for the moment, and the company will not be moving out of Peshawar for a few days. Meantime, here are you two beggars—nicely ensconced in the same prison as those blighters from the Zakka Khel. You see what I mean? I'll have you put to work amongst them. It's unlikely they'll recognise you as members of the Militia who rounded 'em up—not if you stick to the rags you're in now and don't shave, understand?"

Strong explained his scheme at great length. It looked both brilliant and foolproof to us, and it might well mean the end of the Mad Fakir altogether. Anyway, it promised adventure of the first rate order and Binns and I jumped into it with enthusiasm. The cream of it was that even these brutal prison guards were not to know who we were. We should be put into one of the prison gangs to work—with the men from the Zakka Khel—suffer the same punishments with the whip, do the same work as the rest, and generally live the life of these jail birds.

It panned out that way—up to a point. In the gruelling days that followed, Binns and I learned to the full just what it felt like to be a native prisoner. . . . We were looked upon by the prison authorities and by the prison guards as desperate criminals, who had come from Damascus especially to assist Lenhai and other sedition mongers in stirring up trouble for the British *raj*! And we were treated

accordingly! Let me say that among other tough experiences of mine have been spells with both the French and Spanish Foreign Legions, service in the Irak Desert Patrols, and a spot of bother with the Insurrectionists of San Paulo, Brazil—not to mention other and less bloodthirsty adventures; but in no case did I find the barbarities and cruelties so heartbreaking as the life in this prison for desperate criminals situated some few miles beyond the gates of Peshawar.

We were up at dawn. The food was the usual scanty native fare—which one can endure fairly well for a week. After that it becomes totally unsatisfying to westerners accustomed all their lives to greater bulk and more varied rations. But this was the least of our troubles. The strenuous labours which began at dawn and ended at dusk left us thoroughly exhausted during the first ten days or so. Then one hardens or succumbs—it being a matter of indifference to the guards whichever way you take it. Naturally Binns and I resented the lashings of the muscular six-foot guards. But we had started this thing and there was nothing to do but go through with it.

We had to carry out a certain task and then make a getaway of a certain kind. The more we saw of the prison life, the more difficult the proposition appeared. Ingratiating ourselves with certain members of the Zakka Khel was not so difficult as it might seem. In the first place our resentment at the treatment meted out to us straightway earned us a reputation for being desperately bad characters who would stop

at nothing. We singled out four or five of the Afridis with whom we worked and confided to them that we were planning to escape. They were facing five years of this ghastly incarceration—which they certainly deserved, considering their crimes. We gave them the impression we were also doing five years. After which it did not take us long to get together, so to speak.

But I am quite sure that Colonel Strong had no idea of the sort of life he was letting us in for when he concocted his marvellous scheme!

However, we got to work as swiftly as possible. Out in the barren country where we were set to work to build a road out of the rock face of the mountains, we found many opportunities of worming ourselves into the confidence of these Afridis from the Zakka Khel—despite the bullwhips of the guards and the scorching heat of the conditions.

Then it was that we learned of the ambitions of our friends in misfortune. They, too, planned to escape. Our difficulty had been to know where to go after we'd made the getaway. The Afridis settled all that. We should join them. They would not be so foolish as to run to their homes in Zakka Khel, where they would surely be found. They would go to the secret fastness of Lenhai himself—for the British knew nothing of this place, knew nothing of the great preparations proceeding apace there for the ultimate overthrow of the cursed British.

As Barney Binns would say, that was all we wanted to know!



Imagine us then, for days on end, sweating with the labour of breaking stone and cutting a path across the mountain face, searching always for a means of escape, schemes formulated and abandoned, working always under the eagle eyes of the armed guards—when to straighten one's back for a second was enough to earn the slash of the long bullwhip. Long before we finally made that getaway, Binns and I had grown to look upon those sadistic guards with a whole-hearted hatred, a murderous hatred; and we had no necessity to play a part in that respect. Our attitude was convincing enough, our blaspheming genuine enough because it was the real article!

But how to get away? On one side of this road where we worked throughout the long hours of daylight was the sheer façade of the mountain, on the other a crazy drop into the gully. To go down, we agreed, would be hopeless, since we could be winged before we had time to get anywhere. There were possibilities up the mountain side—providing we could find a cleft to dodge into without undue delay. We reasoned that when we did break away, the guards would not follow. They could but fire at us from wherever they happened to be at the time for they must stand fast to watch the other prisoners. In brief, if we could find cover quickly enough, we had a chance.

This sounds like the reasoning of desperate men. In all conscience, my companion and I were desperate enough to want to have done with this wretched scheme. As for the Afridis, they were desperate, anyway.

There came the day when we witnessed a totally unexpected attempt to escape on the part of two men in the gang hardly known to us, for they were fresh comers. It all happened in a flash. We were sweating in the unyielding heat of a memorable afternoon. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a guard lash at the bent back of a prisoner. He leapt suddenly, swung his shovel as if to smash in the face of his tormentor, caught the guard a glancing blow on the shoulder which sent him down. Another guard rushed up but was checked by another prisoner, who had also swung his shovel. I am sure the thing could not have been premeditated, for those two prisoners stared at each other for a breathless second, then dived simultaneously for the valley.

Shots followed them as they stumbled down among the shale and loose stones. One was shot in the leg and brought down before he had covered twenty yards of that treacherous descent. The other ran on, zig-zagging, stumbling and slithering among the shifting rubble. Then he, too, was winged. He threw up his arms, spun madly, then pitched into the dirt. The whole thing was over in two minutes. We had straightened up to watch the incident, surprised out of our habitual cowed subjection by the unawareness of this desperate bid for freedom.

The guards raced along, lashing out right and left. We returned to our sweated labours and our muttered blasphemies, and the hideous grind went on as if nothing had happened. But something had hap-

pened. The beastly episode convinced us thoroughly that that must not be *our* way out.

"My God!" I gasped. "We'll never get out of this!"

I fancy it was just a ragged mutter to relieve my feelings after witnessing that wretched incident, for I have always been more comfortable in action than as a spectator, but it reached friend Binns.

"Quit feeling sorry for yourself, Digger. We've gotta get out!"

Of course. We could hardly climb down now! If we had not made ourselves so conspicuous by our crazy thirst for experiences we should not have been in this jam, I reflected. But what was the use of ifs and buts? Already we had been in this oven-top of a mountain for four weeks. It seemed to me then, in that pessimistic aftermath of a miscarried getaway, that we should have to toil and sweat for months before our chance came. How long must it be before we reached a part of the hillside that offered the opportunity we craved?

And yet, we might have known that our commander would not let us down. We learned later that he had grown uneasy after the passing of four weeks of silence. ("What's the matter with those two rascals? Ought to have heard something about 'em ere this!")

A party of prison officials and a number of military officers came to look over the cutting one day—the road was being built for the better movement of troops in that area. Colonel Strong was in the party. It was rather a shock to see him there,

and it was difficult to restrain oneself from approaching him. As the party moved past the spot where I was working he stopped. He murmured in *Pushtu*, explaining that in a day or two we should be round the spur of rock and in sight of a getaway. He passed on, hesitated again when he came to Binns, as if interested in the man and his work, gave my companion the remainder of his message. It was all over in a minute. Strong was merely carrying out his usual procedure of "covering you, my dear fellow."

Piecing the murmured instructions, we gathered that it would take us about four days to round the spur of rocks and that there we should find a way of escape, and also some assistance. The Colonel assumed we were ready for the plunge. Whether we were or not, he apparently wished us to make it and have done with this blighted prison life.

It took us five days to come into view of that wooded cleft in the hillside—the longest and most gruelling five days I can remember. We had seen such possible means of escape before, but our preparations were not ready in those early days. Now there was nothing to stop us. It was clear from the animated faces of the Afridis that they had seen the chance. The rest was a matter of silent nods and tappings with the hammers. We could, by that time, hold a conversation with the hefty hammers we swung at the rock. It was left to the Zakka Khel Khan himself to make the first move.

He did nothing about it for a whole day. I was tingling with excitement throughout that long day

and returned to our quarters at dusk with my nerves in shreds because nothing had happened. The Khan, it seemed, had intended to give the signal just before we should be lined up for the march back at dusk, but there had been too many guards at the point of departure, and after waiting all that time we could not afford to throw this chance away.

Obviously dusk was the best time. Night would cover us within a few minutes of getting away. So that another whole day had to drag its weary length. Then, suddenly, unexpectedly, as it seemed to my tortured nerves, the Khan lifted his hammer and instead of hitting the rock he caught the nearest guard a glancing blow on the leg that dropped him like a log.

What followed is not easy to describe. I know that about a dozen of us dropped our tools and dashed for the rendezvous. Whistles blew, guards were rushing up, rifles cracked, bullets spat around us. I ran unseeing, head filled with blood, reached the fringe of trees with my legs in ribbons from scrambling over the sharp rocks. We had no idea that so many prisoners were to make the attempt. Looking back on the incident, I realise now that it was the numbers that saved us. A bunch of prisoners had followed us and thus covered our getaway. Most of them were winged and brought down.

I ran with the yelps and snarls of wounded men in my ears. I kept on running, knowing I'd made it, but terrified lest I should be dragged back to that hell-on-earth of a life. With an impetus such as

we had, a man can keep going endlessly, even though his tortured lungs beat against his breast for air and his tongue hangs out like a dog, gasping and panting. Even when we had left the patch of wood and the darkness was closing us about we kept on and on. I was conscious only of some native labouring alongside me, that we were behind the others, for the dull sounds of sandal-covered feet came down to me on the wind and I wanted to catch up with those who were more fleet of foot than I.

I would run until I dropped, for I must catch up to those leaping feet ahead. That was the urge which kept me on my feet for longer than I thought it possible for any man to run. Then the sounds of those other feet stopped abruptly. The man at my side pitched headlong into the dirt and lay there. I stumbled on a few paces, became conscious that the world about me was deathly still. I dropped in my tracks exhausted.

It was broad daylight when I awoke. I was *inside* a breastwork of boulders. I'd been dragged there, so I afterwards learned. Here was the Khan and another Afridi, Binns, and by the living powers! —Eater-of-Women! It seemed he was the rascal who had been running at my side all that time. He had been sent by the Colonel to wait in hiding for us. This orderly of mine had waited three days! I could have hugged his grinning pan! It was then, too, that I learned of the strange hallucination that had spurred my flying feet in that desperate bid for freedom. Those footsteps which urged me on all the time were behind me, not in front!

It was I who set the pace when I thought I was bursting my lungs to keep up with the others. They had run and stumbled until they could move no more! Then I had dropped.

This Eater-of-Women had had his instructions from our commander before he left. It took me a few seconds only to cotton on to the fact that he was addressing me as Syad and Binns as Ali, and that he was conversing with the Khan as one good Moslem to another, explaining that he had met us in Peshawar, where we had done him a great service. He had learned of the work we were doing and had waited many days for us in the hope that we should one day escape. Also, most important of all, he had brought food.

It was a strange quintette that sat down for breakfast inside those boulders on that gloriously sunny morning of freedom. These two Afridis were presently to start on the trek for the secret fastness of the Mad Fakir. They were to lead us thither—as true Sons of the Faith anxious to help in this mighty effort that was to overthrow the British *raj*. Interesting, to say the least! Lenhai knew Binns and myself so well that he couldn't possibly fail to recognise us! It would be fun!

I sat eating breakfast and sniffing the sweet air of freedom, and I wondered greatly just what the immediate future held for us. Doubtless this Eater-of-Women had brought instructions for us which would be delivered when the opportunity arose. One could not but think that his presence here was only a part of the Colonel's cut-and-dried plan.

Meantime, there was food and water and blessed freedom to be enjoyed, the spice of further adventures to be savoured, and one did not care if it snowed.

Our own scheme was to lie under cover until the late afternoon and then travel by night. So we dozed through the day and dreamed about what we should do when we had cornered this Mad Fakir and decimated his ten thousand men, and we could get back to civilisation for a spell with the feeling of having completed a job. Queer how one dreams about the peace of civilisation when one is in a turbulent area such as this—and how one longs, while living the humdrum life of cities, to get back to the wilder and more remote parts of the earth, to the colour of bizarre streets, the crush of strange peoples, the sights, sounds and smells of alien places.

Not a sound of any kind disturbed us during that peaceful day. It was as if we were in a world of our own, a world without habitation, without the possibilities of habitation. And to the strangeness was added the fact that Binns and I must not attempt to speak to each other in our native tongue. Not that we were afraid of the Khan and his brother Afridi. We were three to two if it came to a show-down. But a slip now would ruin everything. The Khan was happy at his release, enthusiastic about the journey to a place he had not as yet mentioned by name. We wished to keep him happy. The slightest shade of an unguarded expression——

We were impatient to be off and did not wait for the setting of the sun. It was agreed that the



Khan and his compatriot should go ahead and lead the way. We fell behind. This was my orderly's opportunity to deliver his instructions. The company was already out. We were at that moment being watched. We were to continue the whole way with the Khan until within sight of the stronghold of Lenhai. Then the fun would begin—for us! Meantime, Militia scouts would keep on our heels. They, of course, could be trusted not to venture too near and give themselves away. It was they who would keep the company informed as to the direction we were making.

Neither Binns nor I had any idea then that all this was but the part of a far-reaching scheme of military operations, in which regiments of regulars were to take part. These are things one learns afterwards. The military authorities do not take into their confidence every Dick, Tom and Harry. We led an army and we did not know it. Hell's Broth Militia was merely the advance guard—just a force of levies being used to point the direction for a strategic advance upon the troublesome Fakir and his boy emperor, a "demonstration" that was to smash him and his force of rebels once and for all.

We travelled all night and reached a village of some importance on the route by early morning, for there we were fed and regaled as if we had returned from great victories. We rested a while but were on our way again before the noon hour. That day of trekking was memorable. We passed many a charred and burnt-out village, and were received at others by salaaming chieftains, who all talked of the hour

that was near. It was an extraordinary experience, and one that could not have been obtained in any other circumstances. This Khan of the Zakka Khel was clearly a person to be reckoned with in the Free Land of the Hills. He was welcomed like a long-lost brother everywhere.

Thereafter a triumphant procession from village to village as, in the following two days, we advanced further and further into the country of the Mohmand. As the trek went on one could only hope that the scouts had indeed marked the direction of our going, for now we were in the very heart of hostile country, and to bring an army into this unadministered area would be an act of demonstration that had not been deemed necessary in the past twenty years.

It was drawing near to dusk on that fateful day when we came within sight of our objective. We had topped a rise and halted at the vista before us—a vast panorama of hill and dale, a wide expanse of broken country, towering mountain crags, valleys so deep that an army might hide within any one of a score of them. And away in the middle distance, nestling in the mountainside, the stark walls of a village, the watch towers, the fort. . . . And, yes! God in heaven! It was *the* village! The lost village of the hills from which I had twice escaped, the second occasion with Barney Binns! This, then, was the secret lair of the great Lenhai? Here, in among the clefts and crevasses and fissures of these mountains, a great army was being massed for the holy crusade.

We sat down and stared at the scene before us. It was significant that the Khan and his brother

Afridi sat apart from us, even more significant perhaps that they were discussing the situation in tones so low that they hardly reached us. Binns and I exchanged glances. Eater-of-Women sat waiting for his cue. Was the moment for action arrived? Should we set upon these Afridis, overpower them, truss them up and leave them for the scouts to attend to—now we had got all we wanted? Those were our instructions, anyway.

When the Khan decided that we should sleep the night where we were, and start out again at dawn to cover the last few miles, we let it go at that. There would be time enough before dawn to attend to them—then we could signal to the scouts that all was ready. Meantime, a few hours' rest was indicated. We should need all our reserve of energy on the morrow.

That decision was all wrong. The thing to have done was to make sure of the prisoners whilst we had the opportunity. Instead of which, we spent the night in fitful dozing. Before the dawn came up we were surrounded by a crowd of tribesmen, all armed to the teeth. They welcomed us like brothers—Moslem brothers—hugged and embraced us, embarrassed us with their enthusiastic reception. They were Lenhai's men, a scouting party come out to meet us, for the news of the Khan's coming had travelled from village to village and so reached the rebel leader.

There must have been about fifty men in the detachment. The tables had been turned upon us. All hope of taking the two Afridis prisoners must

now be abandoned! That did not matter a great deal. What did concern us was the fact that we must continue to play our part, pretend we were in sympathy with these rebels, proceed with them to that cursed village over there, where we should be presented with all pomp and ceremony to the Mad Fakir! It was impossible then for us to break away. They were too many for us. Any attempt on our part to sneak away would have aroused their suspicions at once. We should have been looked upon as spies, shot down, or worse, taken prisoners.

So we went, like lambs to the slaughter, surrounded by these enthusing and excited tribesmen. Binns and I could only exchange meaning glances. We dared not speak to each other in English. We had to do some swift thinking then. There must be a way out of even this predicament. But how? What way?

At daybreak we had another shock. We saw Lenhai's great army moving out from somewhere beyond the village. They seemed to pour out of the mountains, thousands of them, columns and columns marching through the valleys, crawling around the hills, massing in all directions, a gigantic army advancing to battle! The sight was amazingly impressive. This could only mean one thing. The rebel spies had learned of the approach of troops into the Mohmand country. They were advancing to meet them. And here we were, between the two armies! And there was not a thing we could do about it!

It may be said that we ought to have taken a chance—turned back, rushed towards our own forces

to advise them as to what was happening. But it would have been suicide to attempt such a thing. All we could hope for was a bullet in the back. That would have served no purpose whatever.

We went forward with the party, had to listen with sinking hearts to their excited chatter about the wonderful army of united tribesmen now advancing towards us. It is enormously difficult to describe just how one felt during that nerve-wracking trek towards the village. We descended into a gully and met one of the columns—a great body of giant hill-men, laughing, yelling, chanting war songs, firing their rifles in the air, thirsting for battle, lusting for the blood of the infidels. They really believed they would sweep all before them and descend upon India for the final overthrow of the British *raj*—even though many of them had never been in India in their lives!

These giants of men were positively childish in their emotions. They had been swayed by the insane rantings of the Mad Fakir. They were being led by a boy of nine or ten years! Such mentality is not easy for the Westerner to appreciate. But these clansmen are totally different from any other people on earth. Their lives for many generations have been made up of blood feuds. They are born fighters and born to fight. A life is taken by one clansman. Then it is the turn of the slain one's clan to seek revenge. So it has gone on from generation to generation, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. When one recalls that their territory is about eight hundred miles in extent, a vast mountainous land with Chinese

Turkestan in the north, Baluchistan in the south, Afghanistan to the east and India to the west, that it contains nearly a hundred different clans or tribes, and that each of these includes several thousands of souls, it will be seen that the blood feud is a very deep-seated code in their lives.

What Lenhai had done was to unite a number of the clans in one great blood feud—the holy crusade against the infidels who had invaded their country.

Now, it appeared, the moment had come. The Holy War had begun. We were in the very heart and centre of it, with no wish to go forward and incapable of turning back! In the few short months that Binns and I had adventured together in this Free Land of the Hills we had found ourselves in one or two awkward situations. This one was different. I confess to being without hope. It looked like the end to me.

That village was more than a mystery. How on earth had all these thousands of men camped within its walls? We soon knew the secret. We passed into the village once more. It was alive with armed men, abustle with movement and the preparations of battle. But we did not stay. We passed through and out of a gateway behind the towering fort. It led us to a broken roadway that suddenly opened upon a wide valley, a great cleft in the mountainside cunningly concealed by the village. Beyond, snug in the hillside, was another fort, a battlemented castle cut into the rock façade, tier upon tier, a great eyrie formidably fortified.

Our appearance was the signal for a bellowing roar.

They were cheering our arrival! The road wound up to the first terrace. There we were met by some of the chieftains. More shouts of welcome. More embarrassing salaams. Had we not come all the way from Damascus to take part in this wonderful revolution of a Moslem people? We should see how the men of High Asia drove the invaders from their land, and then we could return to our Moslem brothers of Arabia and tell of the mighty deeds!

But first, we must feast. We had travelled far. Moslem hospitality is notorious. Breakfast was prepared in a magnificently pillared and vaulted audience hall. Even while we sat down on the mats to partake of this sumptuous repast our eyes roved apprehensively. Where was Lenhai? Nabi? Mahrila? Meanwhile there was roasted lamb stuffed with dates and cloves and other spices, fried bread that was hot and delicious, chickens covered with rice that had been flavoured and spiced until it was a golden yellow in colour, highly spiced meat balls, nuts, raisins, fruit. Into this we must dip our fingers, display a gargantuan appetite, make much noise to show our appreciation of the marvellous reception and the astonishingly rich food of this barren country.

I never felt less like eating in my life!

Then the fireworks! Into that happy family party walked his lordship, Lenhai, followed by the Nabi and Mahrila. We rose and salaamed the presence. With a wave of the hand he bade us be seated, begged us to continue. One of the chieftains led the Fakir to the Khan of the Zakka Khel. More ceremonious salaaming.

"The Peace of Allah be with thee!"

"And with thou the mighty Allah's Peace!"

Then it came our turn. We stood up. Lenhai gave one glance at me and roared like an enraged bull. Mahrila screamed with laughter. Yes, perhaps there was a humorous side to this blasted situation, and perhaps I should be pardoned for not being able to see it. The whole party was on its feet. Only the Mad Fakir's voice could be heard clearly above that gathering of amazed and angry growls. He was doing all the talking. There was nothing for Binns or me to say. His lordship covered the whole picture. Quite!

"So what!" growled my companion, utterly fed with the circus.



## CHAPTER XII

### ACROSS NO MAN'S LAND

WE had seen the mysterious boy leader on two occasions before, once in the Khyber Pass and again in that house with the Mad Fakir and Mahrila. During our incarceration which followed that interrupted feast we saw him again, and this time at close quarters. He was always surrounded by armed guards. They brought him to look at us. He presented a picture that one cannot easily forget. He was a slight, delicate child, with a beautiful, even angelic, face. His hair was jet black and glistening with scented oils. The youngster turned his huge black eyes upon us. One needed no imagination to appreciate the curious mesmeric power of those wonderful eyes and their effect upon these wild hillmen. And I could not help thinking of the eyes of Lenhai, with their uncanny concentration of bestiality, and those of Mahrila, which seemed always to be brooding within their smouldering depths.

I do not pretend to know the facts regarding the parentage of this remarkable child, Nabi. I know what I saw in that house. I know that the eyes of these three all held, in their own peculiar way, that same magic, the same suggestion of mesmeric power. When that child's eyes looked into mine—I shivered involuntary, and I am not easily moved by this sort

of thing. Mine, however, was more a shudder of pity for the child. Among these superstitious savages he would always be a marked man. They would never allow the youngster to live a natural life. Not with those eyes. He was destined for power, even though he might never have the guts to earn it, for it was easy to see the stature under the white silken robe was as rickety as it could be.

And yet, one sharp glance from his remarkable eyes was enough to make any of those swarthy giants cringe. Ignorance did the rest. His influence over the clansmen was absolute. They believed that the very hairs of his head were from the beard of the Prophet! Moreover, he was Lenhai's mouthpiece, and that explains much of the Mad Fakir's power.

It was incredible that so frail a child should be able to sway these multitudes, that the piping of the childish treble should have such an effect as to make these tribesmen believe he was their hereditary emperor, the ruler of the coming Moslem Empire.

We were permitted to see a great deal during our imprisonment in the rebel leader's stronghold. It amused the red-bearded one to have us roped to a pillar on the highest terrace of his fort so that we might witness his great triumph, his vanquishing of the cursed invaders. We certainly had a first-class view of that military engagement which brought British and Indian troops into the Mohmand country as a punitive expedition for the first time for nearly a quarter of a century.

All the world knows now that three brigades of troops went into action during that demonstration,

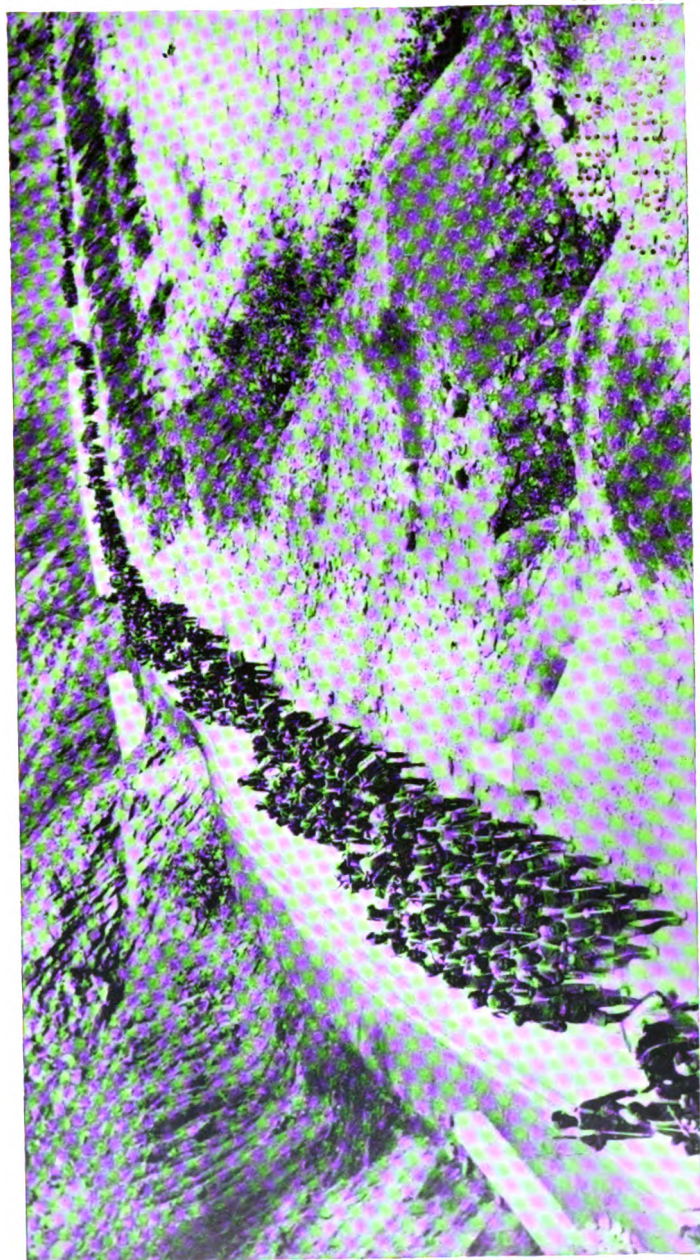
that for the first time in the history of the British occupation of India, tanks and armoured cars were used. In addition there were three squadrons of the Royal Army Flying Corps and a field brigade of artillery with mountain batteries.

From which it will be gathered that this was no skirmish of the guerilla warfare type. The menace had been recognised for what it was and a determined effort made to stamp it out. And I was in the unenviable position of being a compulsory spectator. From our vantage ground we had a panoramic view of the gaunt peaks and straggling valleys of the countryside for many miles around.

We saw the advance of the two great forces towards each other. From the one side, rebels were crawling over the hills like flies, from the other, British and Indian troops were scaling the peaks to establish outposts. A convoy of tanks suddenly came into view, crawling like giant crabs along a valley. The tribesmen, swarming like giant flies over the mountains, fired down upon the tanks. Doubtless their sniping was accurate enough, but it must have been futile against the ironclads.

At all events, they did not stay the progress of the tanks. They rolled on along that valley, those engines of death, and the sight of them must have been startling enough to hillmen who had never seen anything of the kind before! Apparently they had come out in order to draw the rebels' fire, and thus betray the enemy presence, for a great volume of firing was suddenly opened upon the sharp-shooters.

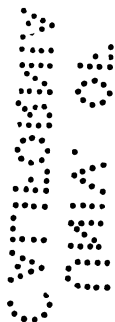
From each side more and more men came into



[*Topical Press*]

INDIAN TROOPS MARCHING INTO THE HILL COUNTRY

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view. It was for us an extraordinary experience. It was as if one sat up on high and watched thousands of puppets play the game of war with each other. From that terrace, with the roar of musketry echoing about the valleys, the spread of barren and mountainous country before our eyes, over which these ant-like men were crawling, it all had an uncanny, perhaps unreal, air about it.

Then we saw the gradual developing of a wide circle of outposts from the British side of the fray, and we could guess that radio signals were flashing from these to the columns advancing along the valleys and over the foothills. There was some confusion among the ranks of the tribesmen. They could be seen dashing about for cover. A hill-top would suddenly be alive with snipers, then a retreat from the position to another vantage point. This went on all over the countryside. It was clear there could be no real military organisation among them. They knew no other kind of fighting but this, the guerilla action of harassing the enemy in a dozen places at once.

Suddenly the mountain guns were brought into action. Shells were shrieking through the air. But this was more of a "demonstration" than any attempt to blow the rebels to pieces. Guns were trained on one of the peaks at short range from the position where snipers lay under cover. Showers of earth and stone were splashed into the air from this peak and it was soon clear that the action was at the crags of the peak and not at the enemy! We watched open-mouthed while that peak had its nose blown clean

off by one blasting explosion after another. When the dense clouds of dust and rubble had died down it was seen that the flattened top of that peak was being occupied by British troops!

"Migosh! What are they trying to do, Digger—level the country before they take it?"

"They seem to have been making a foothold there for the troops!"

"Well, I guess it's all over—except the shouting."

The rebels were being slowly surrounded. Some of the clans seemed to realise what was happening and decamped forthwith. Patches of them were retreating. Others held fast. Airplanes came over, but this, too, appeared to be more of a demonstration of the might of the British *raj*, for there were no bombs dropped. They were reconnaissance 'planes, and they were sweeping the whole battle area. Snipers lifted their rifles but failed to bring any of them down.

During all this excitement my mind had constantly reverted to the behaviour of my native orderly during the abrupt ending of our breakfast, when the Mad Fakir had called to his guards to seize us. Eater-of-Women had promptly disowned us! He had spat upon us and called us traitors and spies. We were fiends who had betrayed his friendship, cursed white infidels who had eaten his salt even while they were planning to make of him a fool in the eyes of his brothers—and so on. It was almost laughable. I should have thought it exceedingly strange in anyone but Eater-of-Women.

When we were being dragged from the audience hall he had been the loudest in shouting every sort

of dirty imprecation after us. He was so vituperative, so vehement in his curses, that I could not but admire his superb acting. I was convinced he was playing a part and that we should hear from him again. So also was my companion. But as the day wore on, the firing out yonder continued unabated, I began to wonder whether the play-acting had been for our benefit or merely for his own safety.

Throughout the day there had been much activity in the village below us. But later it began to take on a somewhat deserted air. The women and children had taken to their houses, and most of the men had drifted out to the sniping posts in the hills. Nor did those who threw down their arms return to the village. Theirs had been an escape to the hills further north—from the British and Lenhai as well. Dusk of that day found the place practically deserted. The holy war was a flop. Long before the sun had set we were aware that we had the terrace to ourselves, and there were no watchful guards to worry us.

"The rats have scuttled," quoth Binns.

"Looks that way. Where is that rascally orderly of mine? Where is Lenhai?"

"Where is the Nabi? Where is Mahrila? Where is everybody?" grinned my companion.

"I suppose this rope is too much, even for your teeth, Barney Binns?"

"Yeah—supposing I could get my head down to it. But why worry? Some of the boys will be along soon. That circus over there is fizzling out, I guess."

There was still about an hour of light left when Eater-of-Women showed himself. I think he would



have gone through hell itself for Digger and Binns. Certainly he went through a hot spot or two in order to get back to us. It appears he had been supplied with arms so that he could join the rebels, and had taken up his position with a bunch of snipers. When the opportunity came he faked a wounded arm and crawled the whole way back to the village. By that time there were many others, not all of them wounded, who were crawling out of the danger zone. There were no fighting men left in the village—only the old craftsmen, the women and a number of children. The women had stared through the lattices at our rescuer, wondering who this wounded hillman could be and why he chose to come back to a village which the British and the Indians would very soon enter.

We, too, saw that handful of women, peering at us from their houses. Their menfolk had not returned to take them to the hills. Maybe they had been killed or wounded and were lying about the hills out there. They looked strange, those lonely women. We had no time, however, to inquire the why and wherefore of their presence in this deserted habitation. We were by no means out of the wood ourselves. We should need to run the gauntlet before reaching the safety of the British lines.

Eater-of-Women led the way, since he had already explored some of the ground and had, during the time he lay among the snipers, marked out with his mind's eye what he imagined would be the quickest approach to the British lines. Dropping down from the village we traversed a broken road on the

mountainside, and made our way along a gully. The big guns were blazing away and there was still a heavy crackle of rifle-fire from some of the hill-tops.

Several times we had to dive for cover. Snipers had spotted us, and though they could not tell who and what we were, they saw the direction of our movements and were not taking any chances. Once we ran into a lively action, bullets were spattering over our heads, and some of them came too close to be healthy. A veritable shower came, whining about us, spitting up the dust. We hugged a shelter of rocks and prayed for deliverance!

"*Kuch dar nahin hai*," muttered Eater-of-Women, "*kuch dar nahin hai*."

He was assuring himself that there was no fear. He had no fear. But he loved to hear himself say so! This patch, however, was merely a foretaste of what was to come. We had yet to make the grade, for we were still in the rebel lines. The road broke off abruptly. There was a gap of some twelve feet where the track had fallen away or been shot out earlier in the engagement. It meant we must dip into the gully and further expose ourselves, or try to leap the gap. It looked a hefty proposition, but it was safer than walking into the open valley. We should have to do that soon enough when we came to No Man's Land between the two lines!

Binns walked back without a word, braced himself, took a running jump, and landed on the edge of the opposite spur of the track. It was a lovely leap, but even then he had only a couple of inches to spare. My orderly went next. He threw his rifle

across, then took a flying leap, landing easily. I followed. If it had not been for the other two standing there ready to seize me I should have toppled into that crevice backwards. This, it should be appreciated, was a little performance carried out while the sharp-shooters practised potting!

We hurried on, bobbing up and down on that mountain track as if we rode a switchback. We came to the further reaches of this spur of rock and halted. Here was No Man's Land. We measured it with our eyes, took stock of every boulder, every hole and crevice, every heap of shale. The light was fading. Even though we should be shot at from both sides, it would be wiser to take the risk now than wait for darkness. We could be shot at in the night and killed without a chance. From the British side we should look like three natives—and that might mean anything to them, the forefront of a daring advance, or just three Moslems ready to give their lives in Allah's service. From the rebel lines we should be mistaken for three deserters—and that would be bad enough to draw all their shot!

We took off our turbans. They were not precisely white, but they would serve. Our plan was to rush across, taking advantage of every bit of shelter on the way, and wave our turbans. We could hardly stay where we were in the hope of the battle dying down altogether. We could not know then that the affair was almost at an end. It seemed to us that anything might happen on that hillside during the night, and we had no fancy for that village back there. We unwound our turbans, made ready. . . .

"Give the word, Digger, and we follow—but not in a bunch."

"Now!" I gasped, choking with excitement on the word.

We leapt into No Man's Land and had not covered a dozen yards when a burst of firing followed us. It was positively hysterical in its intensity! We dropped like logs under the first marked cover. The big guns had ceased now. The rifles were banging away in a desultory fashion.

Up again for another score of yards. Ping-pung! Ping-pung! Devilish close, I thought. This dusky light was the best we could have chosen. Another crazy dash, waving the turbans frantically. They helped. Those rags were shot with holes when we reached the British lines. We saw the khaki tunics and shouted:

"Kurrum Militia! Kurrum Militia!"

I was dropped even as we made the line, even as a khaki-covered arm reached out to clutch and drag me to safe cover I felt the hot sizzling jab in the thigh. I learned later that we made the British lines opposite the Hampshires. We were all three plugged within inches of clearing the danger zone. Had we waited a few hours we could have walked over in perfect safety!

We were lying in the casualty clearing station behind the lines, three stretchers side by side, enjoying a well-earned smoke and chatting to Colonel Strong and Lieutenant Hardcastle, when the news came that the chieftains of most of the clans were coming in to make complete submission.

Lenhai, Nabi, the boy emperor, and Mahrila, the mysterious woman had fled. So far as I know they have not been heard of since. The clans made their peace with the British *raj*. I fancy it will be a long time before any other mad agitator succeeds in stirring up such a broth of trouble as did Lenhai, the Mad Fakir.

We went into dock at Peshawar. After that I felt an ocean voyage was indicated for the sake of my health. Barney Binns was returning to the States. I went with him, a little disturbed, perhaps, at leaving that tough little wallah, Colonel Strong, that lovable rascal, Eater-of-Women, and other members of that queer bunch of levies, Hell's Broth Militia.



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